



Chroma

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This issue is dedicated to Berta Freistadt (1942 - 2009)

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Char March Kiss

This is the top lip.
Up close, surprisingly downed.

A small scar just to the right
of the cupid's bow.
I suck the entire top lip in

and in, her nose-tip squishes
against my cheek, for one never kisses
mirror-like, always
at an angle. I
am a left angle, a 35° girl.

She prefers to skew
to her left too – luckily –
so there's none of that
nose-clunking or spec-clinking,
but, back to the kiss:

The top lip is a roll
of warm uncooked liver –
no, no, firmer, like my belly's
spare tyre – that BIG in my mouth,
and that's before she,

somehow, gets her
tongue in there too – a probing
darting fish-head of a thing.
Why the FUCK can't she stop
flickering it like a dodgy

fluorescent tube down
a hospital corridor? Is she
checking over my fillings?
Making sure they're all
my own teeth?

And this acrid mintiness –
has she eaten an entire tube
of ULTRABRITE?

I suppose I ought to
give the bottom lip a try.

04

Sitting in Circles with Rich White Girls

Chad Goller-Sojourner

excerpts

Throwing Up

Throwing up has always come easily to me. My mother tells of a conversation she had with my pediatrician uncle while on vacation at his cabin. I was around three and, according to my uncle, for no apparent reason, began gagging and attempting to make myself throw up.

She also tells of a time before this. I was thirteen months old and the eldest of twelve babies in a Cleveland, Ohio foster home. She and my father had just arrived from Tacoma, Washington, their plan being to pick me up and head on back. However, upon arrival and after meeting me they were informed of a mandatory twenty-four-hour waiting period. Something about making sure we all liked each other. It was during this waiting period that she noticed that every time I cried, my foster mother comforted me with graham crackers. She says I cried a lot and that she stopped counting graham crackers after the twentieth one.

I have no recollection of these events, but I've often wondered if my thirteen-month and three-year-old selves were simply honing my binging and throwing up skills for future use. Some things I do remember. I've always been too much of one thing and not enough of another: too fat, too dark, too gay; not black enough, not cute enough, and certainly not thin enough.

My story is a story of self preservation. A story of doing whatever it takes to get through the moment, the hour, the day. And, yes, like most self-preserving mechanisms, bulimia worked. Until, well, it didn't. The one thing no one ever told me about self-preserving mechanisms was that their job is to protect the current self, the right-here-and-now self; in my case, the child self. And since they had no interest in protecting my future selves, I ended up here, sitting in circles with these rich white girls.

Oh, hi, how are you? So I betcha wondering what I'm doing here. Well, that makes two of us. Hey, I got an idea, whoever figures it out first, has to tell the other one. Cool? See, I think I'm here because... well, Becky sucked me into her bogus prayer chain. See, I once

heard an old TV preacher say, "Be careful what you pray for, you might just get it," but folks, this... this is not what I prayed for. And I'm not having a bad dream either. I've never had one of them. All my bad stuff happens when I'm fully awake. Like now.

I'm sixteen years old and I spend two nights a week sitting in circles with rich white girls. Trust me, I did not pray for this. So, if you choose to remember anything, remember that my prayer was to have been born a rich white girl, not to sit in circles with them.

And just for the record, I didn't come waltzing in here on my own accord. I kinda got busted by the high school janitor and guidance counselor, who instead of mopping the floors or handing out college brochures, decided to play Cagney and Lacey and stake out the boys' bathroom during fifth period, hoping to catch the girl they assumed must be sneaking in to throw up.

Within weeks, my pediatrician had me on some super-duper vitamins, and was sending me to a guy who claimed he "just wanted to talk about a few things." This was a lie. What he should have said was that the guy "just wanted to listen and occasionally pipe in with *hmm* and *interesting*." It didn't take long for the two of them to come up with a diagnosis of Bulimia Nervosa, which I'm quite certain is Latin for a rare girls' disease not curable with pills, prayer or surgery.

Which meant it was time to bring in a new fleet of medical and insurance professionals, guidance counselors, reference librarians and two still-very-determined parents. Their mission: to find an eating disorder facility (in the mid-1980s) willing to treat a boy.

Camp Bulim-A-Rexia is located in the basement of the St. Joseph's Catholic Hospital, where the décor is nothing less than magically delicious. The thick rust-colored shag carpets look surprisingly like the kind of shit people load into their cars around midnight and drop off at the Salvation Army donation bins. The walls, though painted a color resembling wet cement, seem to come alive, courtesy of oversized portraits of the Pope and far too many crosses with bloody Jesuses hanging from them.

The only person who seems to have a clue is Penny, the fat art therapy lady, which, trust me, is not reassuring. What my parents and the others don't get is that, on a bad day, throwing up is the only thing between me and the bridge, the cliff, or the front grill of some truck. And on a good day... well, I'm not sure; I haven't had one of those. Don't get it twisted, I'm not bitter or jaded or anything tragic like on those ABC after-school specials. I'm just a sixteen-year-old gay black boy who owns more scales than toys, weighs himself at least five times a day, and eats until stomach cramps force him to throw it all up. Then starts all over again.

Weighing-In

I've had a four-year head start on most of these girls. Four years, and no one suspected anything! Not even my dramatic weight loss despite my dramatic appetite, or all those long and multiple trips to the bathroom, followed by the sound of running water and the toilet flushing two, three, or four times before I came out.

There are upsides to having a rich white girl's disease. If you're not a rich white girl, staying off the radar isn't difficult. Which is why I've decided not to tell them how long I've been doing this. Instead, I'm going to go back to locking bathroom doors and counting days until graduation. This will all blow over; because, lets face it, it's gonna be a while before anyone's radar includes sixteen-year-old gay black boys, even if they do own more scales than toys.

I'm not sure when I began my affair with the scale. I can tell you that one of the greatest things about the scale is that its accolades or condemnations are instant; with the scale you always know where you stand. At the height of this affair, I would weigh myself at all hours of the day and night, and when I looked down at those three consecutive numbers staring back at me, that would prophesy how I felt about myself, at least until the next weight-in. And, yes, I know getting on and off a scale multiple times a day doesn't make a lot of sense, but it's never been about sense, it's about rules and rituals.

Three universal rules of a good weigh-in: 1) always use the same scale; 2) wear the same attire; and 3) weigh at the same time of day. Sounds pretty simple. Unfortunately, simple's never been my color; now, complicated I do well. So here are a few of my favorite amendments: Rule 1, sub section B3: make sure the scale is located in the exact same place; even a millimeter off can change everything. This is best accomplished by placing the scale on the bathroom floor and making small indentations in the linoleum at each of the four corners.

Rule 2, sub section 3C: wear the appropriate attire. I've always preferred to weigh in a T-shirt and underwear. And while I know that by doing this I'm prob-

ably adding a pound or two... what's the alternative? Wear nothing and risk catching a glimpse of my body in the mirror? No, thanks. I'll take the pound.

And finally, rule 3, sub section 4H: weigh at the same time each day. Okay, I've never really liked things that come in threes, but suffice to say, each time I did weigh, I'd get on and off the scale around five times, throw out the high and low numbers and average the middle ones.

I know it's a lot to remember, but if you ever do find yourself in need of the perfect weigh-in regime, just remember these simple steps: Exhale. Approach the scale with reverence. Step lightly onto the scale while offering up prayers for good numbers, or at the very least - Grace. Begin counting one one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand, four one-thousand, five one-thousand. Look down for the reveal. YES! IT'S GOING TO BE A GOOD DAY.

Wrestling

I have never looked more ridiculous than right now. I am wearing a bright red wrestling sling, stretched tighter than the skin on an African drum. Adding insult to injury: my fat face is in a fight of its own with my oversized headgear. I can't help but wonder if choosing the one sport where every eye in the room would be on me was such a wise idea? If ever I'd had a plan, wrestling in the district tournament title match wouldn't have been part of it.

Three, two, one, wrestle:

It's clear from the beginning that he's stronger and knows more moves than me. As we flail about on the large blue mat, which reeks of bleach and sweat, I feel my body and breath growing tired. I want this match to be over. I want sixth grade to be over. Still, something in me wants to win. I've never won anything, except for a cakewalk.

Suddenly, I sense him noticing my labored breath and suspect he thinks I'm finished. What he does not know is that I have spent the last two-hundred and seventy days wrestling classrooms, playgrounds, and school buses full of white kids. Surely I've got another twenty seconds in me. Using the one move I remember from practice, I flip him over and lay on top, my weight for the first time working in my favor. I hear Mom, Dad and total strangers scream my name. The ref is counting: one, two, three... followed by the shrill of a whistle and a hand striking the mat. It is the sound of victory. It is the sound of one thousand cakewalks.

I began wrestling the year before as a fifth grader in the unlimited weight class. Thanks to our twice-weekly practices, I'd lost a few pounds by sixth grade, though still not enough to wrestle in a weight class with actual numbers. Thankfully, that was never a goal of mine. I'd seen first hand the commitment and pressure needed to wrestle in one of those weight classes: from

spitting in cups to running around in sweatshirts and trash bags, to meals of rice cakes and clear broth, to standing naked on a scale and exhaling. While I admired my fellow wrestlers' commitment, I knew I was far too lazy for anything like that.

I'd like to think that at some point I would have figured it out on my own: throwing up as a means of losing or maintaining weight had not yet appeared on my sixth-grade radar. That is, until the Saturday morning I came face to face with the most beautiful perfect-bodied boy.

I hear him before I see him. Glancing towards the only occupied stall, I ask, "Hey, you okay in there?"

"Yeah, dude, I'm cool," he replies

Not really convinced, I ask him if he got sick from running around in sweatshirts and garbage bags.

Exiting the stall and holding up two fingers, he smiles. "Nah," he says. "Why do all that when I can just use these? This way I can eat whatever I want whenever I want and still make weight."

There is a bank of mirrors above the sinks which I have been avoiding all morning. I can't recall a time when I haven't been repelled by mirrors. More accurately, I can't recall a time when I haven't been repelled by my stretch-marked stomach, stuck-together thighs, and over-developed chest. Noticing me, taking in my reflection, he offers, "You know, if you wanted to, you could totally drop like forty pounds in no time, just make sure to eat a banana or something healthy right after you puke, you know, so you don't get light-headed."

As he heads off to make weight, I bid him "*thanks and good luck.*" There are no Hallmark cards for encounters like this, only a bank of mirrors where I am greeted by everything I find repulsive about my body. Except this time, shrouded deep within all that mess, I catch a glimpse of a new reflection, a better reflection, one where stretch-marks recede, thighs separate and my chest becomes defined. A glimpse, that if caught in the right light, reflects the most beautiful boy in the room. ■

Christopher Gaskins Human Bondage

07

Like bone-dry damage
licked clean

to the nipple. Residual hairlines still
linger,

still hover
above the waistband, perpendicular.

You squeeze my body like
bags of breath.

I seize your fervor, that lightning fracture
of trepidation.

Like white-hot treason
we fling ourselves

into Dali's wasteland, impale our virtues.
Sigh. Imagine.

We have no reasons.
We melt inside addictive flavors,

a tongue-lined cauldron,
our bedlam of being.



Maitreyabandhu Sestina

Closing my eyes brought them back:
the field, the path, the narrow gap
we squeezed through. I never see your face
or how you moved, what you did, the way
you spoke – I almost can't remember you.
Under a bridge we built a den

and sometimes went there after school, a den
of cardboard and powdered earth, back
of The Abrasives. It was summer and you
were... what?... I can never judge the gap
between us, then or now. Along the way
we disturbed a nest of bees. I see your face

or think I do – perplexed? amused? – a face
saved in newspaper. We were near the den,
among the nettles and wild garlic, the way
a millstream ran, long dried up, back
before they closed the bridge – a gap
through broken hawthorn. If I'd asked you

how you felt, what you wanted, what you
thought, would that have made your face,
your hands and eyes any less a gap
between us? There were trees round the den
choked with ivy. Later, when you turned back,
you watched me, fast legs all the way,

run from furious bees. I ran away.
It was all I could do, hurt by them and you.
No stiff cardboard, front and back,
binds this story. I should have touched your face,
your neck, called you names, but the den
was hardly tender, hardly anything, just a gap

in memory which might have been made up, a gap
through elder shadow, past Orchard Way,
into everything that happened: a narrow den
too tight to kneel in, a hidey-hole you
walked away from, a thought we couldn't face.
In spite of that, I wished you back.

The den we found was presence and a gap.
You said nothing. I said nothing back. I had my way
of thinking, touching your ill-remembered face.

09



Ziv Gil Kazenstein
Vanessa 01

In Your Flesh

Isabel Franc

Translated from the Spanish by Sophie Mayer

*Inside you, my love,
In your flesh,
What silence of trains on your back.*
Federico García Lorca

With her soft, warm hand she caressed the other woman, olive-skinned, cool and angular. Immediately, she set up this connection which, she knew, would flow into something. Embracing her waist, she counted – beneath her skin – a rosary of ribs and vertebrae. Always elegies for her tiny, skinny lovers, the complete opposite of her, for she was a true mass of humanity. Her lifelong friend attributed it to some kind of perversion on both parts, but, in particular, on the part of her lovers: as if she were not from god, she whom they loved because of their courage, placing more value on their idyll than on the exact weight of such an immeasurable body. An orgasm of one hundred kilos is a lot of orgasm, one would say. She made no reply, she remained alone, watching with a placid smile that said, *what would you know, my dear*, typical of one who feels no need for justifications. For her, it was not perversion, but true love. Of course, if she were to say this to her friend, she already knew her reply: she had to grind such lyricism down to dust. So she explained nothing, saying only, “I was with a girl, and it was wonderful.” Her friend couldn’t understand how she could pretend everything was fine, as, before long, something must have taken her lovers, because after an encounter with her, they were never seen again, as if the earth had swallowed them up. But what bothered the friend the most was that she got considerably larger after each romance. Perhaps that doesn’t sit so well with you. And even though she didn’t know it when she saw her, she had actually lost almost half the weight she gained after an affair.

The skinny girl welcomed the warmth of that hand like the sun’s caress in springtime. Even before she’d begun to embrace her, the immensity of the other made her feel wrapped in cotton wool. Before the amorous ritual, whenever she had imagined making love to her, she’d been afraid of being overwhelmed. Now, however, she felt the softness of the huge body and wanted to sink into it. She lay on top of her like someone cast onto a waterbed and the skin so hot, the abundance of her flesh, the immensity of a body brimming in every part, evoked a uterine sensation. Kisses, from a damp and fleshy mouth, splashing her face and lips and eyelids. And words, whispered in her ear with breathiness sibilant and sibylline, that travelled through her to settle in the very depths of her sex. *I am going to give you an eternal orgasm, my love, eternal.* Spread out above her, she seemed like a herringbone on top of this lushness. With the point of her nose she cleaved her cleavage, and a pulpy swell spilled across her cheeks; her face became submerged in a great mammary chasm, swimming in a sea of breasts. She felt penetrated through her skin, through her very tissue, even to her spirit. Wrapped in an eiderdown rapture, she appeared to be sinking into her flesh and the silence of trains at the moment of departure entered her. She’d been promised an eternal orgasm and she saw that yes, this was it, the sucking of quicksand, and she disappeared, gulped down by this enormous anatomy as whipped cream swallows a spoonful of sugar.

Then there were days, as was her habit, without leaving the house, savouring an orgasmic digestion which lasted several hours and, once that fell away, a strict diet of stillness, until at least half the weight had been consumed through her pores, while outside, the world asked after the girl and organised search parties.

When the police came to arrest her, she was waiting for them. Some day it had to happen. But she had not foreseen – and she rejoiced – that it would be two women who came for her: the police chief and an officer of the National Guard, worth coping a feel, for sure, tall and fit, her cap curving over her eyebrows. She, who didn’t believe in chance, thought this must mean something. You’re under arrest, said the chief. I know, she said calmly, and offered her wrists for cuffing. But the officer was moved by her gentleness and resigned expression. She seemed so harmless! She looked over at the chief as if to ask her, *do you really think this is necessary?* and the other woman replied with a hand gesture and a look that it wasn’t. When she opened the door, the officer couldn’t help but think: *Will she fit in the car? And even if she does, surely she’ll take up the entire back seat.* The three women drove in silence to the police station. She with that placid smile. In her flesh, the vibration of all the lovers she’d absorbed, her body full of eternal orgasms.

Making Tea in the Dark

Eric Karl Anderson

12

It was dark by the time Anne arrived home. She didn't turn on the lights. Her arms were loaded with cardboard boxes and old shopping bags full of photographs, letters, clothing, books, CDs and songbooks. This jumble of personal belongings was all that was left of her son and she didn't want to look at it. She manoeuvred awkwardly down the familiar dark corridor to Christian's old room, bumping against the wall and stubbing her toe on the skirting board. Once everything she rescued from Christian's flat was stored in the bedroom she could breathe a sigh of relief. They were back home safely. Where they belonged.

The dark rooms around her were silent except for the faint bassline from the music in the flat above and the distant sound of cars on Streatham High Road, two streets away. She wanted to shut them out and enclose herself in this darkness. It weighed heavy around her like an enormous blanket. She breathed it in greedily, felt herself bodiless. She didn't need to see anything because it was all there. Moving through the rooms, she held out her hands to brush against the walls, her dining table, portraits, the piano, the counter-tops and the grooves of the door frames. The phone rang and she swiped at it, sending it clattering from the table to the floor. It felt good to silence it.

In the kitchen she filled the electric kettle in the sink and set it to boil. The water slowly turned ferocious, tearing and clawing at the metal till she thought the kettle would explode. Anne took a mug from the cupboard.

"This is how you make tea in the dark," she thought to herself:

- Place the mug on the counter.
- Carefully hold the kettle over the mug.
- Curl your finger over the cup's rim.
- Slowly pour in the hot water until your finger feels the sting.
- Stir for several seconds until the tea has steeped.
- Pull the teabag from the mug and twist the string around the teaspoon and teabag to extract every last drop.

This is what she used to do in the early mornings before Christian got up. Before the sun had risen sufficiently to shine through the blinds, and while he slept soundly in his room, she made tea. She didn't want to wake him, didn't want the kitchen light invading his room through the glass above his bedroom door. He was so light-sensitive that he often slept with a crumpled T-shirt over his face and later, after he became a cultivated teenager, a sleep mask. She did this even though he used to wake her up late at night after noisily arriving home from God-knows-where or playing his music loudly without taking heed to her banging on his door.

She was careful not to wake him because she liked to watch the nearly indistinguishable shape of him sleeping in the dark. As he changed and grew into a man she found her love for him changing, too. One early morning while the sun was still only a pale yellow smudge on the horizon, she peeked into his bedroom and was startled by the sight of him. Sleeping soundly, wearing only a pair of boxer briefs, his beautiful dark limbs tangled in the white sheets, he reminded her so powerfully of his father that Anne felt a deep bodily warmth. The room smelt of boy. She wanted to crawl into the bed with him and feel his arms tighten protectively around her. Instead, she went back to the kitchen and waited for the rest of the world to wake up.

Ever since she was a girl, Anne often got out of bed too early. She maddened her parents who were woken at five in the morning to find their eight year old daughter sitting in a bath overflowing with suds playing with her toys. Water soaked the carpeted bathroom floor, an emptied bottle of shampoo was cast aside, and Anne looked up at them innocently saying, "I wanted to play." As she grew older, she became more delicate in her early morning movements, discovering an odd secret in the quiet. Here she could move with stealth and remain undetected. No matter how much people might scorn or criticize her, she was awake and in ownership of the world before anyone else.

As a teenager, she discovered a downside to these

mornings of solitude. She was entirely alone. In the dim light of her bedroom, with the city so eerily quiet, Anne felt she didn't know herself at all. During the day she ran with her friends through the streets of London, so confident in their caftans and flowing hair. They went to the morning pictures at the ABC cinema on Mile End Road and then down to Brixton where Anne's friend Jan sang with a reggae group called The New Islanders. Jan's high-pitched voice reminded people of Millie Small. It was at a New Islanders' gig that Anne met Simon.

She admired how supremely confident he felt in his skin, even though he spoke about the suspicion he always felt from the police as he waited for a bus or entered a shop, the disdain he felt simply walking on the pavement outside of his community and sometimes on his own street. Their affair was quick and heated. She bit his soft ear lobe and liked the way his arms circled around her slightly lifting her off the floor.

They began seeing each other regularly. But one morning Anne woke feeling queasy, as if she'd just ridden a roller coaster. Without giving him a reason, she told Simon she never wanted to see him again. She deliberated how to get rid of the baby. There were options, but she couldn't bring herself to go through with any of them. Her parents were outraged to have a pregnant daughter with no husband in sight. Anne claimed she had only been with him for one night and didn't even know his name. When Christian was born and her parents saw the colour of his skin, they threatened to kick her out. Anne cried and pleaded. They grudgingly supported her though she had to contend daily with their disdain. Money was always tight and she took a job as a shop assistant as soon as she was able. Her circumstances were only bearable because when she looked at her child in the morning light Anne knew for certain who she was.

She didn't mind getting up in the night to tend to her boy. She enjoyed soothing her baby back to sleep, giving him a sip of water, checking that he wasn't too hot or cold, singing softly "Angels watching over me." It made her happy to watch him sleep soundly. So much so that she kept him in her arms even after they had gone numb "This made me a good mother," she thought to herself while standing in her dark empty flat. "This proves I loved him."

During the day, she had to endure the looks from people on the street or on the bus who saw a white woman carrying a black child. The looks from black people and white people were different, but were most definitely looks that had something to say. "You don't know what they're thinking," her neighbour Paulette said. But Anne knew. She'd seen enough of them. In the bedroom, in the mornings with the stupid world shrouded and unconscious, there was just the two of them.

Anne paced back and forth in her darkened hallway remembering all this. Her tea had gone cold on the counter-top so she made a fresh cup. Her thoughts kept circling back to the day of the bombing. She still felt she could have done something to prevent his death in that pub two months ago. She thought about it obsessively. If only she had kept in better touch with him. If only she had asked Christian and his boyfriend to come round that evening so he wouldn't have been in Soho. If only she had called him a few minutes before the explosion and he'd have stepped out of the noisy pub to speak to her on the street. She dug her fingernails into the palm of her hand.

Anne's head was crowded with so many thoughts she caught herself speaking aloud. Her own voice sounded strange and foreign. She turned on her stereo and played Lennon's *Walls and Bridges*. Then she curled up on the sofa with her new cup of tea to sink deep into the music and darkness. The anger she felt from her earlier encounter with Christian's lover was still in her muscles, pumping through her veins. She felt a powerful desire to act violently. The things Mark said when she went to collect Christian's belongings from their flat were ludicrous. How dare he! Asking her to discuss feelings.

"I'm still so angry about it," he'd said. "What that man did to Christian and everyone in that pub and in those other places. Can't we talk about it? How we're feeling?"

How American of him! As if she'd fall into his arms and weep, confessing everything. There's no way this American boy Christian had been living with for only two years could begin to understand her feelings, the deep shuddering ache she even felt in her groin.

Trust me darlin' come on listen to me, come on listen to me. Come on listen, listen.

As the song came to an end, Anne became conscious that someone was knocking on her door. Her limbs ached as she rose from the sofa and went to answer it. There stood her neighbour Paulette under the bright hall light. She embraced Anne. Though Anne wanted to recoil, she softened into her friend. The great warm mass of the woman held her tight and said, "The verdict is in. I heard the news. He was charged with murder, seven life sentences." Anne held her breath as she tried to take this in. It was incomprehensible. She pulled away from Paulette who turned the hall light on. Anne squinted at the brightness and slunk away to her bedroom.

Paulette followed. She noticed a jumble of things on the floor of Christian's old bedroom. "Should I leave you alone?"

"No no," Anne replied, collapsing onto her bed. "Thank you for telling me the news. I went to Christian's flat today. To get his things."

"Those are his things on the floor? You want to leave them there? On the floor?"

"Yes, for now."

Paulette stood in the doorway to her bedroom, "Was Mark there?"

"Yes. I was hoping he wouldn't be," Anne said and then paused, rubbing her face harshly. "He tried to be nice. He disgusted me."

"What happened?"

Anne was suddenly desperate to speak about all of the things she wanted to wrap in silence and bury.

"He tried to console me at first, but I wasn't having any of it. I told him I was there for Christian's things. But then he said he wanted me to go with him to the Old Bailey to hear the verdict. Journalists wanted to speak to us. Doesn't he think I know that? They've been calling me and knocking on the door. He said there's a group of them committed to seeing justice done. And they want to carry on, appeal to the government to do something about the intolerance in this country. He told me all of this, but I only wanted Christian's things."

"Of course," Paulette assured her. "You don't have to get involved with any of that."

"So I went to Christian's bedroom with my box to take his things and Mark tried to stop me. He said we had to sit down and sort Christian's things out. We had to decide what each of us would keep. And I said, 'But this is my son! His things are mine!' I grabbed at everything I could. Then he tried to take something back out of the box, so I slapped him. He backed away, that pathetic little... that little bastard. And do you know what he said to me? That I didn't teach Christian how to love himself enough. He may have acted brave to the world and looked confident on the outside, but inside he was sad and scared. That I couldn't respect him as a gay man. That I failed to prepare him for the world as a black man. Even though he's my son. That I couldn't understand what my child needed and couldn't protect him."

The words rushed out of Anne's mouth, even though Mark didn't say any of this to her.

"You should get some sleep," Paulette said.

Anne covered her face and rolled on her side. Paulette couldn't take the burden of Anne's words and closed the bedroom door softly. She was about to turn off the hall light and leave, but a powerful urge to look through Christian's things overtook her. She went into his old bedroom and turned on the light. His belongings lay in a sad heap on the floor. She picked through the pile of clothes, pulling out handsome Armani shirts and crumpled wool trousers. It was important to Christian to look nice and make a good impression. He was always convinced he was about to be discovered and on the brink of becoming famous. His mother thought it was a waste spending all that money on clothes, so whenever he visited, he liked showing them off to Paulette. He looked so fine. Such a talented pianist and so charismatic. If

you put him in a crowd of strangers he'd instantly have a dozen new friends. Paulette didn't know why a strong young man like Christian had to waste himself on men, but she accepted it. He was physically affectionate with her. She loved how tactile he was, always ready to give her a hug and let her put her arm around him. She lifted his shirt to her face and inhaled deeply. The smell of a cologne mingled with the scent of Christian's skin still lingered in the cuffs and armpits.

Paulette had lived next door to Anne for many years and often spent time looking after the boy as he grew up. Anne would sometimes knock timidly on Paulette's door, slouching boy by her side, and ask, "I'm so sorry, but would you mind?" Paulette was familiar with that craven look in a mother's eyes. It was a look she'd seen plenty of times in her cousin Tamara's eyes when she brought around her two girls, or her friend Annette's eyes when she arrived unexpectedly on her doorstep with her baby boy in tow. Sometimes the mother was in a hard spot with nowhere to turn, and sometimes she played the victim because she badly wanted some time away. Paulette smiled and welcomed the boys and girls, knowing this child-minding role was expected of her as a childless woman.

She liked looking after Christian the most. The boy sat on her lap while she told him fantastical stories of a mischievous spider who found ingenious ways to trick a rude monkey who worked around the corner from them in a newsagent. The monkey would never sell the spider sweets even if he had enough coins to pay him because he thought spider was filthy inside and out. The clever spider convinced monkey that a nasty multi-coloured snake was on the loose eating everything in sight and persuaded monkey to give him all of his walnut whips for safekeeping. Paulette and Christian would laugh at monkey's stupid fear. For listening so well, Paulette would reward the boy with a chocolate sweet. Christian would bite half of it and hold the other half up to Paulette's mouth for her to taste. Then, with gooey lips, they'd kiss each other and cuddle on her sofa until Anne knocked on her door.

Paulette folded each article of clothing she picked out of the box and placed it on Christian's old bed. She rummaged through scraps of paper that were loose in the box or stuffed into the pockets of jeans and trousers. She inspected them for pieces of the boy she had loved. There were several large notebooks full of songs he'd composed or half-composed. She ran her fingers over these pages of indecipherable marks. Other bits of paper were clearly rubbish, but she took her time with them anyway. Credit card receipts, old travelcards, or scraps of paper with hastily scrawled shopping lists or phone numbers. She carefully smoothed out each piece of paper and

placed them in a pile.

There was an envelope of photos; several snaps of Mark and several of Christian and a few of them together. Some posing on the Southbank or at parties. In cafés and in front of the Arc de Triomphe. One looked like Christian took it himself, lying on the bed with his shirt off so you could see his broad strong shoulders and defined biceps. What really stood out was his grin, that magnificent smile, naughty and irresistible. Paulette gazed at it as tears clouded her eyes. She deserved this moment alone with him. It was a point of pride for Paulette that as a teenager Christian would come and speak to her in confidence because she felt they shared an ancient blood root. There were many times when he felt he couldn't talk to his mother. Anne implored him to be more practical, go to university and get a good job instead of pursuing his interest in music. She inexplicably despised Mark and argued with her son about him. Paulette felt that what Anne really hated was the man her son had become and the fact that he'd grown away from her. Though she knew it was wrong, she slid the photograph into her pocket.

Anne heard Paulette quietly leaving, turning the light off and shutting the front door behind her. She was glad to have the silence and darkness again. Instead of thinking of her son she conjured up fantasies and half-dreams of visiting the murderer David Copeland in his now permanent cell. She wanted to ask him if he was happy to have killed her son, even if it meant a pregnant white woman had to die alongside him. The bombing had killed more than just the minorities Copeland had targeted. Was her son's blood worth it? Her son who was to be doubly hated for being both black and gay.

"Yes," she wanted to tell him. "Because all of us should be exterminated, cleansed of this earth. Because we perceive the world selfishly. Because, with our dividing lines and perverse ardour, you want to make evident the chaos that is and always will be there."

Hours of wide-eyed darkness passed. Darkness was all she wanted to know. Darkness which refused to fully accept her into it. Darkness she strove to embrace. Here was the only place her love could exist and perhaps this was the only place it ever truly existed. Eyes open and searching for familiar shapes in the darkness, the barest form of a silhouette concealed and safe. Hidden in the darkness, her love. And as time passed, the darkness dissipated. Painfully, in nearly indistinguishable hints and gradations of colour, it lifted slowly slowly slowly. Leaving her present. Leaving her alive. Alone... And there was the sound of the rubbish truck and the sound of birds. Neighbours showering. The creak of floorboards. The drone of a passing aeroplane. The squeak of bedsprings, the sound of lazy lovemaking. Shadows awoke. The clock

ticked on. And there was Anne. With bleary eyes, she turned to the window and saw a cold light invading her room, telling her it was morning. ■

Brent Armendinger

Wood Shop

A boy and hope were rockets
and telephone poles between miles.
We made them out of balsa
wood and glue. The desk beside me
was empty, running through a park
in another time zone. The crush
of leaves undid his pulse, musical
like mine. We memorized
the Pythagorean Theorem,
glued failure to a ladder
before it crashed in the outfield.

When the body intrudes
I translate it into a lake. My lungs
get so watery thinking of sex
I should learn to read by vertebrae.
It is unusually hot here, and I hate
direct sunlight the way I hate
a snowman on a visible lawn. The blood
makes a face inevitable. So the noises race
through the thinned-out air:
“If you walk too far down the hill
you’ll return with half your bones.”

Pretending to swing on cobwebs
is not the same as braiding rope.
Some words are whispered
only when a jackhammer sounds;
literacy requires a shovel.
It’s easy to mistake the dug up dirt for gold –
see how history shines.
Listen to those propellers:
even the movements of giants are made of risk.

Brent Arnendinger’s “Wood Shop” lifts off the page, as any poem about flying machines must. It veers tremendously in and out of sense and experience as it travels from memory to knowledge. It hooks and unhooks meaning, making you want to re-read it, like an interesting face, to learn how it won its shape: “The blood makes a face inevitable.” Assonance builds an acoustic, musical desire in the first stanza, until the harsher consonance of the bathos of its final line: “it crashed in the outfield.” There’s an intricate and compelling tension between abstract and concrete images: the boy/hope; ladder/failure; shovel/literacy; giants/risk which conjure the vertiginous quality of flight from the real world and the necessity of it. With an assured and intimate voice, he presents us with the startling visual evocation of a complete, imaginative world as perplexing and vivid as a “snowman on a visible lawn.” **Cherry Smyth, Judge, Chroma International Queer Writing Competition, 2009.**

Sugar Index

Beatrice Hitchman

1) Serving Customers

I took this literally. Most of the women at the bar were plaid-shirted and disappointed. They inhabited corner tables – vantage points – and spent their hours nursing herbal tea. I put them in a box marked damaged goods; I didn't find them very hard to charm. They had "futon" written all over them, and soon they were all over me on their futon – but in the rough and tumble, nothing lasted longer than a week.

No matter; the next day always brought someone new striding up to my bar, slipping me a suggestive tip, and the next night always brought me to their sofabed. As I lay looking up at the strings of fairy-lights – red, yellow, green – dancing above my styrofoam pillow, I reflected that it was precarious – *oh, yes* – but what did it matter? I was Jimmy-Dean-sixteen, and my imaginary motorbike was purring out front for me.

The day she came, I'd fallen back on Kim, my boss and proprietor of the *Café des Dépossédées*. It was a long-established fact that Kim had a soft spot for me (she also had soft spots on either temple where her hair was nappy and wispy, like a baby's). But even her crew-cut patience was – like her fold-out mattress – wearing a little thin.

2) Boredom Management

There are only so many things a girl can polish on one shift when the tide of clientele has receded. When even my swagger began to lose its sheen, I knew it was time to act.

The long spring days passed in a shimmer of intense calculation. To pour away tedium, I devised a proof based on my love of people-watching. The maths is complex, but the basic formula reads as follows: $A + x + GD = D$ where D is drink ordered, A is Approach, x is haircut and GD is General Demeanour.

In other words: I could tell from the way someone approached the counter exactly what drink they would order. The earth-mothers rustled up in a crackling of muds and khakis, and scratched their armpits ruefully whilst ordering camomile tea (large mug, two sugars). They waited with eyes fixed on the ceiling and the future beyond, but I'd become so quick at my job that

I never gave them long to dream. The secret slimmers wore hopeful pastels one size too big, and wanted skinny cappuccinos. Standing with both palms flat on the counter, they pointedly ignored the sugar-cubes giving them come-on glances from the fat bowl. The executive women came around eight-thirty and could always be heard before they were seen – high-heels clopping, briefcases rapping their shins, pinstripes immaculate. They ordered round after round of double espressos, no sugar, slugging it down and slamming the styrofoam back onto the counter. In a twinkle of earrings they were out the door.

I chalked up tally after tally of successful predictions. Bitter people order bitter drinks. I called it my sugar index.

3) Meeting and Greeting

As she pushed the door open, I said *hey, sugar*. It didn't seem to come from my mouth, but from the middle of my head – music from a Walkman. She met my eyes in an ambulance-blue stare. Her eyes crinkled at the corners.

Halfway to the counter, she dropped her handbag and spilled the contents everywhere. A lipstick bounced off her pink cashmere bust. Everyone rose in their seats and, with a sigh, rushed to help her. Hands scrabbled to touch her belongings, some crept back to their seats clutching a tissue, a ticket stub, a pastille.

When she reached me, she cracked a smile. I already knew what she'd have and handed the pink syrup to her, with a cookie for good measure.

She kept smiling that dazzling smile, took the tray, slopped her drink and sank down into a nearby chair. From time to time, she looked demurely up at me. The pink drink disappeared, and when she got to the bottom, she slurped up the dregs as children do.

4) Customer Liaison

Our first date was in the café itself. Every half-hour I brought her a different-coloured sticky drink and she cupped her hands round it and looked up at me.

– *So, you're new here*, she said. Her voice lilted like an Alabama belle's, but nobody could tell you exactly

where she came from.

Arl = S, I thought, where *Arl* is Accent Indefinable and *S* is Seductive.

I sat down and told her my life story, starting from the day I was born and ending with the most recent mochaccino. I've always wanted a studio audience and the way she looked at me, you could almost hear the canned laughter echoing from the walls.

- ...So I took my guitar and a suitcase and left. I could hear my Mum crying, but I call her once in a while to let her know I'm okay.

I spread my palms out on the table.

- I miss them, but they didn't understand me.

I followed this up with a soulful glance at her, the prince contemplating a valley of thorns. She was pale; her heart-shaped face fringed with hair as wispy as candy-floss. *She must be ill*, I thought; and it suited my princeling-ego to believe it was true.

She looked at me, twinkling, from over the tops of her empty beakers. A yellow-stained plastic cup, a blue and a pink one were lined up in front of her.

- Interesting, she said.

Slurp went the remains of the sugary drink.

5) Pleasing the Regulars

So we don't see you any more, Lily said.

I remembered the way she'd crept onto her own futon at midnight, cupping my face in her hands.

I prepared a green tea for her, and I took care over it, but what she said was true. Even Kim had started to notice that the crushed-ice machine was always empty and the till didn't add up on my shifts.

- Get me a cooling drink, she'd say, raising herself up on the pillows. *It's so hot outside, I'd prefer us to stay indoors.*

I didn't mind. She was so pale she blended in with the sheets, which meant I always had to come and find her.

6) Dressing Appropriately

One day, in a gesture meant to show how our relationship was developing, we hit the road. My pockets jingling with hard-stolen change, I offered her the drink of her choice (strawberry milkshake with extra syrup) and a cupcake in a rival café. Kim watched jealously from behind the glass of the *Dépossédées* as we walked out arm in arm. Her skin had a milky sheen and the tips of her fingers were white blurs splayed against the window.

We'd only got to the gutter when it happened. I was trying to kiss the back of her neck when a fat drop of rain slid down mine. She squeaked in alarm, hopping back under the eaves of the café.

I suppose it was our first fight, although it was entirely one-sided. The only way I could coax her out from under the overhang was with a golf-umbrella, a raincoat and a pair of gloves.

7) Inevitably, There Were Problems

Mine started the day Kim fired me.

- I'm the only one who knows how to work that machine and fix everybody's drinks before they come through the door, I shouted. *I'm a local legend!*

Kim intimated that the only reason I was a local legend was for my legendary ability to outstay my welcome and never make up the sofa-bed afterwards.

- Fine, I said.

I threw my dishrag at her head and stormed out. The regulars sniggered into their coffee, but I didn't care – I was still the youngest gunslinger in town and I knew exactly where to go...

8) So I Went There for a While

I've come to stay, I said, dropping my cases dramatically either side of me (*Splash*).

I tried to make my eyes as huge as hers. My hair was plastered to my forehead and I hoped this would only increase what I considered my Audrey-Hepburn pathos.

She pulled her pink-bunny bathrobe tighter around her and looked at me. Though it was gone midnight, she seemed wide awake. *Almost as if*, I thought to myself excitedly, *she somehow knew I was coming...*

Then she disappeared. I blew water out of the side of my mouth and rearranged my quiff. She came back and threw a towel over me, then took my hand. She was wearing gloves.

- Of course you can come in, she said, leading me down the corridor, *but don't touch me when you're wet.*

There was only one thing to be said to this, and I said it.

She made me dry off anyway.

9) But Water Has a Way of Coming Back

I spent my days supine, reading on her couch. I read from Ayn Rand to Zola, asking them the same question about love, but found no answers. So I fell to rearranging her fridge. All I ever found in there were sweet things. Doughnuts on the top shelf, stored neatly, box by tessellated box; packs of bubblegum-flavour soda for a soda machine packed in on the second shelf; frosted jars of raspberry jam in the salad cabinet.

I made rare expeditions to buy secret savoury snacks, and on the bus I read travel supplements; I planned a journey for us both to the ends of the earth. Maybe I could conquer her fear of the rain by dunking her in a fjord.

One evening, the sunset was unusually pink. I observed the warm glow from the front-room window; it overlooked the pavement, so I could see her from the moment she stepped out of her Mini. The evening light softened her edges; her cashmere cardigan had a fuzzy halo. As she crossed the pavement towards the apartment block, her feet seemed to skim the ground.

The phone tinkled out Westminster bells. It had nev-

er rung when I was alone in the flat before. I picked it up, in case I got to introduce myself as her girlfriend.

There was a faint hiss on the line.

- *Hello?* I said. There was silence. I sighed. *Now you're supposed to say Hello back.*

Impasse: whoever-it-was was thinking about this. I rolled my eyes for my invisible audience.

- *Who are you?* The voice was querulous: the unmistakable timbre of a double-espresso drinker, black, no sugar.

I was about to say my name when there came a sucking sound; the voice breathed in and out once with a rasp.

- *You can give her a message from me. Tell her nothing tastes good without her.*

- *I don't have to take orders from you,* I said, but the line had gone dead.

- *Who was that?* she said, standing in the doorway.

I tried to hold the phone away from her but despite her sweetness, she was strong.

10) Often with Interesting Results

Please Don't Cry, she said, pronouncing the words like a signpost. She was holding me at arm's length. She looked panicky; her eyes bigger than usual.

- *I don't want you to go,* I said, trying to kiss her. She veered away.

She made me sleep on the futon again that night. At midnight I crept through and curled up in her arms. She gave her usual breathy sigh and slept on.

I began to think about losing her to a voice. I wouldn't sleep next to her again. It was all too much for me. *Forgive me.* I was only sixteen.

My tears trickled onto her face. Bit by bit it began; the dissolution of molecular bonds; tiny crystals folding into one another. It was only when her nose began to melt that she realised what was happening; first one delicate nostril caved in, then the other. A tear cut a sizzling path through her candy-floss hair and slipped into her ear; the lobe drew into itself and was gone.

Her eyes registered panic as they pooled into the molasses that had been her cheekbones. Soon all that was left of them was a child's birthday cake: blue dye swimming in a sodden chunk of sugar. Then her fingertip blunted; the water seeped the length of her arm; an oxbow lake curled around her neck.

From her mouth came the smack of a person licking their fingers after eating a doughnut. I supposed it was a cry for help; all I could do was make it quick. Hating water as she did, there was no bucket in the house, nothing bigger than a coffee cup; I emptied mugful after mugful over her dwindling body until she was gone.

11) Business Development

When I returned to the *Café des Dépossédées* I brought with me three cool-boxes of syrupy pink liquid.

- *Oh,* said Kim, and dipped a finger in the liquid.

A dreamy look came into her eyes as she tasted. She would have gulped down all three boxes if I hadn't intervened.

- *No,* I said, *I've had an idea.*

By sunset the word had spread; all of them came, even the secret slimmers, beating a path to our counter, clamouring for a cup of the pink syrup. The café was full of sighs. Even diluted to the hundred-thousandth part she was everything they'd ever wanted.

Now, each morning, the crowd stands ten deep outside the plate-glass window. The cool-boxes are locked in the basement; multiple alarm lights blink placidly throughout the night.

Am I tempted?

The horsehair futon has been replaced with Egyptian cotton; it caresses the cheek instead of tickling, but when Kim tries to offer me sugar in my morning drink I turn her hand away.

Didn't I write the formula? *Bitter people order bitter drinks.* Nowadays I always take my coffee black. ■

k. bradford

Translations, & Other Tellings

i flew down to the tip of the continent
with my curly and mystifying beard

who knew what the people would say?

the taxi driver, for one, stared at me like I had a beetle
stuck to my chin, he tried hard not to reach out
and crush the bug, small dark thing that clung rudely to my face

it only took five minutes of conversation for him to forget
my bit of unseemly manliness

you see i smuggled my queerness into Chile
oh land of the quiet homos

but what if i flew in on a giant rainbow with bright wings of pink triangles?

do the badges of the Western Gay need a translator down south?

i don't think so. i drank piscos with a Chileno Gay. we flock toward each other –
little gay sonar going out across the language barriers.

i told him his flame could shame the flameyest
of flamers in Boys Town or the Castro.

he threw his flames at me. i spoke my broken spanish.
my small beard punctuated my American accent.

i said: where are you hiding? he said, Ciudad de Mexico.

but he doesn't hide at all. and i walk like i am not afraid.

my beard tells fortunes, each curl tells the way.

his limp wrist forecasts the weather, and the moods
of political leaders.

we are soothsayers, we are wizards.

what would the world do without the gays?

we talk about yesterdays, our tongues cross back through
stonewall, the first out Chilean.

Bachelet & Obama are not saviors, but they change the ground.

i said: i wish Pinochet's coup had never happened.
he said: i wish Martin Luther King, Jr was still alive.

where were the gay superheroes then?

41 Frags

Nathan Kuzack

21

D + 257

I think today might be The End. They say you can sense when The End is nigh. If there are no more Frags after today then you'll know.

I'm not searching for The Moment any more. I know precisely when it was: it was 257 days ago. After The Point of No Return. That's what threw me.

There's no one to blame but me. And there's everyone to blame. Which makes us all even. It's taken me this long – half a lifetime – to see that. Sometimes, when you don't want what you can see, you see whatever you want.

It could have been so different. Life, I mean.

(Kevin, if you should ever brave a computer and read this: you've been the best friend a person could ask for. Don't think too badly of me.)

D + 19

The postman delivered some letters. I threw them away unopened. There was a knock at the door. I didn't answer it. The telephone rang. I deleted the answerphone message without listening to it. It's ridiculously easy to ignore life. The Veil helps in this respect. Nothing can penetrate it. No letter. No phone call. No person.

D – 755

My counsellor ventriloquised her way through an entire discourse on the importance of "family" this morning. They always end up telling you that blood's thicker than water. I say shit's thicker than both of 'em. Not out loud, of course.

Afterwards, some cute guy in the pharmacy recoiled in horror from me at the moment of comprehension, only to overcompensate for it by turning all touchy-feely. At which point I recoiled from him. It was almost comical. Almost.

D + 15

You could slap a patent on the silence in this place.

It was interrupted only once by the phone ringing. I let the answerphone get it. Wrong number. Some guy asking for a load of brochures. Years ago I would have tried to call him back, tried to let him know he'd

made a mistake. Nowadays all I think is: "Learn to dial, ya bastard." I think about this guy – he sounded perfectly nice, sweet even – waiting for his brochures to arrive in vain and I feel nothing. Absolutely nothing. There's a vacuum where empathy used to be.

D – 11

Something very odd happened today. I was reading a book (*From Here to Eternity* – all the stuff about "queers" forgiven 'cause it's so damn good) when I heard a voice say three words. It sounded like a man's voice – a man who was in the same room – and it pronounced the words very clearly.

It said: "You can believe." Twice.

I didn't think too much of it until it happened again later on. Exactly the same words, recited twice. The first time I'd written it off as something weird but explicable, but this second time the voice was unmistakable. Could there be a more irritating message? Believe what exactly? Believe in The Journey? It's tailor-made to drive a person insane.

I had to call Kevin. He was phlegmatic about it. He said: "It could've been worse. It could've been saying 'I'm gonna gut you like a fish, faggot'."

I begged him not to tell anyone or I'd find myself trussed up in a straitjacket and chewing on a ball gag, which he promptly informed me was some people's idea of a good time.

Thank god for Kevin.

D + 99

Wuthering Heights. Romeo and Juliet. Bloody Twilight. Gimme a break. No straight couple has the first clue about forbidden love. Nor star-crossed love. There's no glamour in it. No romance. Fiction rings hollow.

In the post office today a woman burst into tears over some fellas, started to become a bit hysterical. Everyone fussed around her, falling over themselves to comfort her, but it was all I could do to stop myself from slapping her stupid face and yelling, "What the fuck have you got to cry about? Think about it, bitch. Well? Huh? You really think that's worth crying over?"

Everything's relative.

D - 5,571

Love changes everything. Love is not a stranger. Love is a major key. Love is a many-splendored thing. Love comes quickly. Love will save the day. Love conquers all. Love on a mountaintop. Love to love you, baby. Love me for a reason. Love is love. Love alone. Love lives here. Love is the drug. Love at first sight. Love's about to change my heart.

PATRICK ❤ THEO

He even said it. Miracles *do* happen!!

D - 42

Everything changes when a simple trip to the bathroom can reduce you to tears.

Everything.

D - 1,593

I was never going to be famous. I was never going to be rich. I see that now. Success was never on the cards, but when you're young you don't grasp that. You reach for The Moon regardless. You're mesmerised by the glow of it. The promise of it.

When I was a kid my grandmother on my father's side used to say I'd been "born in the wrong wrapper." It had seemed like a perfectly grandmotherly thing to say at the time. A benevolent, humorous thing. People used to laugh. I laughed. But now I see the malice in her words. The *Schadenfreude*. She knew. She knew that Mother Nature doesn't reinvent the wheel. She knew way back then. She knew how difficult – how *impossible* – life was going to be for me.

And it hadn't fazed her at all.

D + 117

A girl in the corner shop asked me if I wanted to buy a 10p Bag for Life today. I replied: "Nah. I'm not gonna live that long." I'd said it deadpan and she didn't even bat an eyelid. Not a flicker. Of anything. Candour displayed. Candour ignored. You've got to admire that in a way.

D + 21

I breathed on the medicine cabinet mirror by accident and written in the fog were three words.

You don't exist.

Okay, four words without the contraction.

It freaked me out big time. I must have written these words, but I have no memory of doing it. I might have thought it was a practical joke had I known anyone ingenious enough – or devious enough – to write such a thing. Besides, I only cleaned the mirror a few days ago.

*You don't exist.**That's just cruel.*

D + 10

It takes balls to do what I'm doing. It takes guts. I feel a strange kind of triumph. Why play by the rules of a

world that's stacked the deck in its favour?

On rare occasions like this the whole reason for The Point of No Return seems like a *felix culpa*.

D - 4,982

These aren't really diary entries; they're more like fragments. Fragments of a day. Fragments of a life. Fragments of a demented mind!

I'm going to call them Fragments from now on. Or maybe Frags for short.

D - 1,201

My smoker's cough isn't getting any better. I have to quit for good next time. Kevin says I sound worse than a chain-smoking navvy with TB.

It doesn't help when his answers in the Best & Worst Game make me laugh/cough myself silly.

Example: best royal? "Out of the lot of 'em, I'd have to say Princess Leia. She's haughty, she's regal, but that doesn't mean she hasn't got an eye for the fellas, and she even snogs her own brother in *Empire Strikes Back*!"

Worst movie villain? "That old crone in *Titanic*. She could've fed a small country with that diamond, but what does she do? She hoards it for years and then chuck's it in the ocean, the evil old hag! She should've chucked herself in after it."

D - 3,466

I was almost murdered last night.

I can still feel his hands around my throat. And their fury. Their desire to see me die.

The worst thing is I can't even tell anyone. I have to lie about it.

D - 136

I wish I could pinpoint the day it all started to go wrong. The summit of the slippery slope. The point at which I should have dug my heels in. The Moment. It must have been before The Point of No Return, but apart from that it's hazy. I torment myself thinking about it, trying to work it out. I wish my head were clearer. I wish I could stop thinking about it.

But I guess if wishes were horses beggars would ride.

D + 56

People suspect what's going on, but they say nothing. They'll continue to say nothing as long as my actions don't infringe upon their lives. It takes a lot of work, a whole lot of lying, not to infringe upon their lives, but it's the greatest gift I can give them. After all, who needs such a potent reminder of the apples who've tainted the barrel? The revellers who've ruined the party. The members who've brought shame on the tribe.

It's a comfort that everything fades. Everything returns to the dust it came from.

D – 101

How does it feel? How does *it* feel? No one's ever asked me that question. Mainly because the answer would be too much of a downer to listen to. It feels like being invaded, taken over, something unthinking having cast an unbreakable *Imperius Curse*. It feels like being old without actually being old. It feels like being slowly transmogrified into a zombie. Not dead, but not alive either.

People think that you take the pills and that's it. What else is there? They don't understand. They don't have a clue.

I know there's so much I should feel thankful for. Impossibly much. My brain knows it, but my heart doesn't feel it. Rather than being thankful, I'm resentful. Resentful of being alive.

D – 15

There's an old saying that goes something like: "There's no darkness so powerful that a single candle cannot chase it away."

But space is full of stars. And it's still dark.

D + 27

I keep looking at memorial websites. The Vietnam War. 9/11. Iraq. Afghanistan. The Quilt. I spend hours flicking through them. Looking at faces of the dead. Reading heart-rending tributes. Names, faces. Faces, names. It's morbid, I know, but I can't stop myself. Part of me hates it. It's mawkish. Sentimental. I tell myself I do it out of a desire to remember those poor dead people, but I never knew them in the first place. I fantasise about somebody writing a memorial for me, but I know they never will. No one cares, and who can blame them? Even I wouldn't bother to memorialise this life.

So speaks the bitter, self-pitying old queen.

Self-pity's like masturbation: it's free and easy and everyone does it.

I wonder how long it'll be until The End of the World.

D – 79

I went for a walk with Kevin. We sat overlooking the pebble beach on a bench dedicated to some poor kid who died in a motorbike accident. Westwards the sun was beginning to set. Shafts of multicoloured sunlight were slanting down, first one way then the other, from a patch of luminescent cloud, striking the ocean's surface and making it shimmer with fragments of reflected light. The sight was spell-binding. Magical. It was as if Nature was putting on a light show entirely for our benefit. We both agreed it was the most beautiful thing we'd ever seen.

Completely without warning, someone in a group of teenagers on the coastal path behind us yelled, "Suck on this, fags!" and, laughing, threw a glass bottle at

us. It didn't hit us – wasn't even close – and it didn't break on the soft grass, but it might as well have done both. It wouldn't have caused much more devastation had it exploded on us like a mortar round.

The spell was utterly broken. The magic evaporated in an instant. The view was revealed for the illusion it was. It wasn't there for our benefit; it was there to mock us with a vision of what might have been.

Kevin tried to make light of it, but his jokes were half-hearted and weak. There was real sadness underneath them. He knows. He knows as well as I do.

D + 152

In order to produce sane, decent, well-adjusted children, all parents have to do is love and care.

That is ALL they have to do.

D – 45

I've always been freakishly aware of the passage of time. Or, at least, I seem to be more aware than other people. Everyone else lives in the moment. Everyone else is so *now*. I can spend hours just wandering around a graveyard. Looking at the dates. The names. The little poems. Working out the ages. It seems impossible to me that in the place of every headstone stands a ghost who was once living and breathing and thinking like I am now.

I was born too early. I loathe how primitive we are. As long as the march of technology continues unhindered, pain, suffering and growing old will one day become things of the past. Gene modification will curtail ageing. Brain-based cybernetic computers will end pain. Both of these things will render disease impotent. It seems fanciful now, but so did walking on The Moon a hundred years ago.

Pain. Suffering. Growing old. Nature's no fool. Without these things, won't the very idea of death be intolerable? I wish I could see the future. I wish I could experience it.

Kevin's the opposite. He thinks he was born too late. He loves the old ways, adores vintage cars, hates anything modern, especially computers, which he distrusts on principle. This is from someone who'll think you're talking about Kylie, Madonna and the Pet Shop Boys if you mention "the classics."

D + 68

The doctor's secretary keeps ringing. I missed my last appointment. I feel like screaming "leave me alone!" down the phone. They don't know about The Journey. They don't understand how bad their good intentions are. I don't want a relapse. Why can't they just stamp their notes and be done with it? "Lost to follow-up" I think they call it. The first word says it all. *Lost*. Lost cause. Lost soul.

Another lost loser being ignorant for the second time. A mould cast back in the 80s.

D - 737

There's this Veil between me and the rest of the world. It descended when I started taking the drugs. It's always there now. It moves – kind of *billows* – but never lifts completely.

I quite like The Veil. It dulls my senses. It stops me from caring. It makes me *untouchable*.

D + 131

Whatever words come out of their mouths, people think I deserve this. They think I asked for it. They think I deserve to suffer and die. I know they think this because I think it.

I am the rape victim who dressed "provocatively." I am the young thief who trespassed once too often. I am the cruising-site queer who got beaten to death. I very nearly was that. Literally.

I can see it in their eyes. The judgement. The accusation. When it comes to the lives of others, understanding and sympathy move like molasses; judgement and blame like lightning.

But I know the truth. Everyone takes some kind of risk. Nobody's perfect. The only difference between me and all those holier-than-thous is that they got away with it.

D - 1,093

As soon as I saw the look on the woman's face, I knew. I knew, but I still couldn't believe it.

It's times like these I miss Patrick's arms. Literally. His arms. The strength of them.

This can't be happening to me.

D + 10

The withdrawal's bearable. I still wake up feeling as if I've just been in a car crash. And I still laugh when I think about the guy who thought I meant this metaphorically. How easy it is to see metaphors when none were intended. Especially when your life *is* a car crash.

Overall, my head feels clearer. I've been reading a lot. H.G. Wells. Ayn Rand. William Golding. Austen. Kafka. Conrad. Their books are like the repositories of their minds. It's my biggest regret (apart from the obvious one): reading's one thing, but writing's another. No one will ever read these words. I don't know if I could bear them to.

D - 1,990

Maybe some day somebody will take all these Fragments and piece together the whole picture.

Maybe I will.

D + 130

Diarrhoea is The Devil spurned. I'm constantly swallowing one pill or another out of desperation. Painkillers. Antipyretics. Anti-inflammatories. I hate The Journey. All I've succeeded in doing is replacing one

set of pills with another. There's no nobleness in suffering. There's no dignity to be found in wallowing in your own shit.

I keep seeing strange black shapes in the periphery of my vision. When I look in their direction there's nothing there.

I feel horribly, irrevocably, alone.

D - 5,021

I saw Paris today. He looked dreadful. I avoided him. I really don't get why people take risks. There's no excuse for it any more. It's the height of ignorance. The height of irresponsibility. What do they expect?

A couple of Jehovah's Witnesses made the mistake of knocking on my door. I listened to their crap for a full half an hour before subtly dropping a little fact that made the sweat literally leap from their pores. It was fun watching it dawn on them that they might've just knocked on the door of their Everest. Or their 'Nam. Or the Antichrist.

I used to quite like the fact that my name meant "god's gift." That didn't last long.

D - 41

Men vilify women for being easy, yet lust after easy sex with them. Women say all they want's a good man, yet yearn for bad boys. The pious preach about love and forgiveness, yet justify hatred and war in the name of god. People profess to be repulsed by homosexual acts in public, yet indulge in them in private. Gays talk of being proud, yet are consumed by shame. The rich gorge themselves at charity dinners, yet ignore the fact that the poor are still starving.

Life is nothing but contradiction and hypocrisy.

D + 125

I'm hot and feverish all the time. I've got skin that would make a leper wince. I joked (half-seriously) to Kevin that I daren't venture outside for fear of scaring small kids and animals. It's hard to believe that men used to call me beautiful. But they did. More than once. I look at young guys with creeping envy. The more I look at them the more I feel like the old leech in *Death in Venice*. And I'm only 34.

Now I turn heads for all the wrong reasons. People stare at me. I feel like hollering at them: "What the fuck are you gawking at? You turned me into this!"

I wish there was somebody I could look right in the eye and say those words to in all sincerity. I wish there was a single person I could blame outright.

But is there anyone else to blame? Really? The only answer I can give myself is... yes – there is! I blame that stinking farmer for what he did to me when I was seven years old. I blame my parents for not protecting me from him. I blame a whole raft of school-kids for watering the seed of self-loathing. I blame their teachers for letting it happen, and for even joining in

at times. I blame the preachers and the succession of pontiffs for pedalling that ancient lie about man lying with man. I blame the pious for believing the lie without question. I blame people like those teens on the coastal path for making a mockery out of beauty. I blame those hate-ridden bastards in the park that night and everyone involved with bringing them into this world...

The problem when you're angry with a whole society is that the only person you take it out on is yourself.

D - 445

I finished reading *Maurice* today. EM started it before the First World War, but it wasn't published until the 1970s. Apparently, on the manuscript he wrote: "Punishable, but worth it?" Yes, it would have been worth it, EM. I feel as if I should sympathise with his reasons, his fear, but instead I feel angry with him. It's hard to believe that the power to do so much good was just stuffed in a drawer.

D + 45

I should have turned this into a crusade. I would have made a name for myself. I could have been the new Zackie Achmat. I could have turned The Journey into a whole "if people in Africa can't have the drugs then neither can I" sacrificial type of thing. I could have had the Home Secretary or the Prime Minister begging me to start the drugs again.

But I don't have the strength to even begin being that pretentious. I don't give a shit about people in Africa. Not really. If I did I'd be trying to help them. Or I'd be donating everything I own to charity. That's what someone who really cared would do. I don't give a shit about myself, let alone them.

Let's brush under the carpet of consciousness the fact that any kind of crusade would mean going public. Stigma's far too paralysing to even consider that.

I feel as if I should hate admitting all this. Even if only to myself. But I don't.

D + 33

I've lost over half a stone already. My tongue and the inside of my mouth are all ulcerated. Eating and drinking are painful. It's more annoying than anything else.

Melissa came over and showed me the Clit Kit she'd got from Ann Summers. I told her I had something just as sexy and proudly unveiled my "shit kit" (for taking a stool sample). We couldn't stop laughing. At least, we didn't until my mouth got so painful it made me burst into tears.

D - 600

During the Vietnam War soldiers had a way of dealing with officers who they deemed to be too gung-ho, men whose orders were putting their lives at risk

without good reason. They simply pulled the pin on a grenade and tossed it into wherever the officer in question was sleeping. Simple but effective. Threat identified. Threat eliminated. Whether the victim was wounded or killed didn't matter; the effect was the same. The unpopular officer was taken out of the picture, while consensus of opinion and a code of silence ensured the guilty were never punished.

The weapons used were called "frags" (short for fragmentation grenades), the process – "fragging."

I like the term Frags even more because of this.

Human beings have been fragging each other for millennia.

D - 3,930

Patrick and I are over for good this time. We were never more than a one-night stand. Somehow we turned one night into years.

God, there's really nothing else to say, is there?

Except "never again."

D + 160

Paul Monette. Derek Jarman. Nigel Finch. Brad Davis. I realise I'm just like everyone else: I only think about the famous ones. I've read *And the Band Played On*. No one gave a shit until Rock Hudson died. Fame is our religion, the famous our gods. It made me weep with shame.

Today I feel like I'm betraying all those who went before me. I threw away a lifeline they would've killed for. This isn't courage; it's cowardice. I need my old feeling of triumph back.

I am a victor. A traitor. Victor.

TRAITOR!

I'm frightened.

D + 7

What if, for some unlikely reason, someone were to read these words a thousand, two thousand, ten thousand years from now? What advice would I give them? What message, what pearl of wisdom would I choose to send through time? What would I – a human being who'd experienced ageing and pain, disease and suffering, who'd known a time before the Internet, who'd watched as The Towers fell, who'd felt himself being slowly zombified by a long-forgotten virus – what would I say to you, Phantom Reader from The Future?

I thought about it for a while and I came up with this: Cover The Moon. The Moon is dangerous. It is disappointment. It is despair. As long as it is visible, we reach for it. Uncontrollably. It's in our nature. We are all lunatics. We reach for The Moon while knowing that so few of us can ever touch it. I reached for it and it was my undoing.

It will be Man's undoing, too – I feel this very strongly. Mankind will reach for The Moon while standing on a pinnacle. He will take one step too far

while groping for it and will fall from the pinnacle's great height. I don't know why, but I feel certain this will happen if the danger isn't realised.

Cover The Moon, Phantom Reader. For god's sake, cover it.

Before it's too late.

D

It's been almost three years since it started.

But today the real Journey begins. Today is D-Day.

From now on D- marks the past and D+ the future. It feels as if the D should stand for something, but I'm not sure what. Decision? Determination? Detox? Drug-free? I'm not going with the obvious one.

Everyone warns you not to go cold turkey, but I'm certain this is the right decision. I feel as strong as iron about it. I'm tired of these chemicals in my body. In my blood.

There's only so long you can go on licking your wounds. There's only so long you can fight the tide. ■

This story takes stylistic and emotional risks with a verve – and ultimate success – that I have encountered in very few contemporary English language stories. I remain profoundly moved, and earnestly impressed, both by the author's brave embrace of the story's difficult, seemingly impossible journeys, and by the unfettered emotion that sears – yes, *sears* – virtually every paragraph of this bleak, unsettling, but always elegantly rendered, tale. **Thomas Glave, Judge, Chroma International Queer Writing Competition, 2009.**

Aileen Penner

Digger

26

pull apart
press together

compacting
breathing

pistons press up
down

pull
pull push push

(suck in)
breathe out

(i wish someone would)
air pulled through clenched jaw

digging grinding pistons working the head of the machine making the bucket
do what the driver wants

bearings slip, roll, rotate inside their casings
these movable parts work together

(i wish someone would)
heat up
metal grease metal

weight of steel on
gravel
stone
dirt

(i wish she would) scrape me
from the inside out.



Nick Field
Prostration 1

Gravity

Aneil Rallin

28

The boy sits across from you. Sometimes the boy will slip the rings off your fingers and slip them onto his. The boy's fingers are slender. The gesture, simple and erotic, delights you.

You return with the boy to your room.

The room is large and angular, the wooden floor newly laid. There is a desk, a chair, a bed, and an old bookcase of dark wood. There are no books on the shelves, just neatly folded clothes, a cell phone, and your laptop computer. The room has only one window but it is bright. From here, you can see a slice of the sea.

You tell the boy you have rented this room to repair and mend.

The boy reads from the journal he is carrying with him, from a piece by Laura Kipnis, a piece titled "Adultery": What would it take to expect more forms of gratification and pleasure in the present, in spheres other than intimacy alone – even without the hand-me-down utopia of sex.

You tell the boy you tire easily, that you are genetically anemic. The boy wants to know how your anemia affects and disaffects your desires.

The boy says you learn to map your desires the same way that you learn your way round a new city. You read something in a paper or overhear someone talking about a place. You follow leads or you follow someone who moves you. Your knowledge is arbitrary.

You move, the boy says, from clue to clue, from name to name, from lead to lead.

The boy gives you a brush and paint. The boy says, I want you to write words on my body.

What should I write, you ask. The boy says, write a secret.

Facing you, the boy undresses. You watch the boy undress. He turns and offers you his back, his shoulders, his buttocks, his thighs as he lies naked on your bed. Write, the boy urges, write me a secret. You write. The boy writhes under the words you write. When you finish you tell the boy you've finished. The boy lies still. Shall I, you ask, read my secret, reveal it to you? No, the boy says, it's your secret, as he goes to take a shower.

You are driving with the boy on an open road. The monotony of the flat, flat land pleases him. The boy asks, what about this land moves you? The infinite possibilities of repetition, you say.

The boy says he finds people who don't process life through written language odd.

The boy says I want, like you, to have an ongoing affair with language. I can tell, he says, your body obsesses over language, is addicted to language. You desire the love of language.

You say nothing.

The boy asks, who is the you who writes? Is the you always a fiction? Is the I always a fiction? Is your body a fiction? Is my body a fiction? Are all bodies fiction? What about the abrasions on bodies, marks that you may or may not see, are they, too, fictions?

Still you say nothing.

The boy says he wants to avoid thinking of queer desires as a variation on the theme of universal love.

You say that pleasure comes in strange and unexpected ways.

You tell the boy you have learnt to revere, to treasure the strangenesses of love, of lust, of desire, of pleasure.

You are sitting on the floor drinking tea with the boy. You sense the boy's stresses, his tenseness, and massage his shoulders, his back.

The boy is contemplating the contours of his unclothed body. Where a body ends and begins.

You tell the boy to claim the body that pursues its own ideas. This is something you think you have read somewhere but you cannot remember where. This is something you think the boy would say.

Every body has its own sociology, the boy says.

Your body, you say, provides truths, untruths, is responsible for dispensing your desires, your fears.

The boy says your body comes into being in relationality. It comes into being in relation to other bodies.

Staring intently at the sharp angles of the room, the boy asks, are bodies only the surfaces of our skins? Are bodies beyond and behind the skins? Do the skins

demarcate the lines of bodies? If not skins, what are the demarcations of bodies?

Later, when the boy's body begins to grieve silently, you hold him. The boy's tears turn you on.

The boy says, I want you to watch me masturbate. You rise and open the blinds.

Afterwards the boy says, we spend at least a third of our life in the dream world. Why, he asks, are dreams seen as less real than real life?

The boy tells you he is feeling nostalgic, melancholic. You tell the boy to revel in the feelings of melancholia that are sweeping through his body.

The boy says, I am planning revenge. You don't ask, revenge for what? Instead you say, listen for echoes from the sea.

You go for a swim in the sea. You dive into the water, then surface, then dive again. The cold water embraces you. You lose yourself in its chill, its encompassing movements.

The boy is still in your room with the angular walls. You both stand at the window and contemplate what you imagine are the movements of the sea. You say little to each other. This intimacy brings you pleasure.

From memory the boy gives you a line he says is from Roland Barthes, whom he is studying in his critical theory class at university: either woe or well-being, sometimes I have a craving to be engulfed.

The boy says his greatest fear is not existing. You ask what it is about dying he fears so much. He corrects you. He is not scared of dying, but about not existing. He tells you there is a difference.

You are sitting with the boy on the steps of an empty house. You are remembering past desires, rethinking erasures. A car slows down in front of you and the driver yells, faggots, queers, and drives off. The boy is enthralled at having been recognized.

You tell the boy he is like someone else you know. You both get the same look in your eyes when you need help, but never ask for anything.

The boy says, it is pointless rehashing the impossibility of connections gone cold.

What about silence, the boy wants to know, do you find the energy of silence erotic, are you moved by it? Is silence the absence of utterance?

You say silence is a noun and a verb.

You say silence is rarely silent. In silence you see, you hear, you feel, you taste, you smell, you desire.

You say, language does not consist only of sound, but also of silence.

Later the boy calls you from a pay phone. His cell phone is dead. I miss you already, he says. I am not going to do anything to make things irreparable.

You believe me, don't you?

You will tell the boy you do, you do believe him.

The boy says I can't get the image out of my mind: a mother in Gaza during the shelling, urging her disemboweled son as he struggles to push his bowels back into his abdomen, no, my son, go, go and join your brother and your father.

29

Swithun Cooper

The Quieting

Here you can listen to a muscle flex in the dark,
to the hairs on my chest as they rustle with breath,
to sweat collecting itself in the small of your back.
We are cooling wax figures placed inches apart –
the world goes no further than the sheet of the bed,

until you start fighting it: making it scrape and stick,
twist round your legs like tinder, holding you down.
It fails. You're up and opening the window,
letting the night spill down us, clean and cold.
Before, I could have heard the goosebumps bloom

on our arms, but now the outside lashes in:
the upward grumble of the clouds that roll
across the climbing streets, burst every bank,
and snag themselves on signposts, setting off
the shoes and shrieks of drunk girls caught by rain.

Close everything. Make half this room your home.
You be the city. Curve round me and sigh.
Let concentration shrink to the grit on our skin,
put your wrist against my ear and let me hear
your blood run its river: the circuit of you.

Robert Hamberger

In Justice Square

(for Mahmoud Asgari and Ayaz Marhoni, aged 17 and 18, publicly hanged in Justice Square, Mashhad, Iran on July 19th 2005, for allegedly conducting homosexual acts)

When my hand, palm down on the table,
rested, waited, for a chance that his smallest finger
might stroke against mine momentarily,
my wish was granted and my heart
flew from its cage.

When his eyes looked at mine for seconds longer
than was necessary, and my gaze
strayed to his mouth like a bee to hibiscus,
this was forbidden:
each finger, that minute, my eyes, his mouth
unlawful.

If we knew our skin to be lovesick
why risk the thought of a kiss?
The prospect of his breath an inch from mine
shook my nights. His voice spoke of danger,
shame and fear while I watched his lips
shape the words, his tongue
sing each sentence.

The slope of his shoulders became my prayer.
I can't sleep in their mercy now,
more secretive than murmurs.
Boys do it until weddings beckon.
Would we both have obeyed our fathers
to become good men?
When they lash my back I'll confess anything,
waking again to the smell of blood.

Let us be an example to you.
Break our hands and we'll repent our sin.
Cut the noose and we'll deny each other,
renounce all men from this day forward,
as if the blindfolds you knot round our eyes
stay bound tight and are never undone.

31

Schizzi Rozzi

Maria Jastrzębska

1

Instinctive? I know what to do. It's the one place I can reach with my fingers.

It would be easy to rip it clean away from his face grinning above me. Lucky for him that old lead pipe was there in the long grass and thistles, tall as us. He can scarcely breathe he's pushing so hard; his mouth puckered as if blowing a trumpet, eyes squinting as if saying *I told you to clear off* as he keeps bashing my head against the pipe. I can just reach, though. With my free hand. He isn't expecting it. One ear entirely exposed. Only close-up, the lobe is fleshy and the inside peachy-coloured, intricate, delicate.

2

The whole thing takes ten minutes. Rizla – no one calls him Ryszard – knows the form. He kisses my mother's hand when he arrives and she asks if he'd like *herbatka*, but we're already halfway upstairs.

We keep our clothes on. I can hear my parents moving about and talking downstairs so I know they're not coming up, but I listen out just in case. My mother could decide to bring up a tray of *katarzynki* on one of those embroidered blue napkins for guests. I perch on the edge of my bed ready for flight.

Just before he starts kissing me, he says "I'm not going to give you all that true love bullshit, you're too smart for that". It sounds very grown up, so I nod. His dad was stationed in West Germany, so he's still got an American accent. It makes everything he says sound grown up. He says he can't stay long – he's meeting Magdusia, his fiancée, and her parents for dinner, and rolls his eyes like we're co-conspirators. He undoes the zip of my jeans and then unbuttons his own and slips a condom on neatly. While he's screwing me he looks at his watch. His face softens and he looks serious as he asks me: "Is it big enough for you?"

3

What I can't believe is that neither my mum or dad nor the French teacher notices my black eye the next morning. I tell Jenny and Pauline. Pauline is worried but Jenny and I have a laugh over a bottle of cider after school. It turns out she's heard the same "rose-bud cheeks" speech from him.

"What's his name, you two-timing dirty little slut?" He whacks me across the face so hard I lose my balance and fall back against the table knocking a pile of books and papers onto the floor. There are times you can step out of the frame and times you can't. I can't feel where he's hit me, I can't feel anything here on the floor, but I need to think fast. If I told him I was in love with a girl would it make it worse? He's ranting about my "lovely rosy cheeks" and how he thought I was going to be his angel, his muse, pure and innocent, but that I'm just like all the others. I feel bad lying, but I know it would make it worse, so I say nothing.

I look up at the flocked green wallpaper, then at the books around me. He's got the Penguin Modern poets, Yevtushenko, Rilke, Pavese, Montale. ...*come tutta la vita e il suo travaglio in questo seguitare una muraglia che ha in cima cocci aguzzi di bottiglia.** There are bits of the film script he's writing on the carpet, too. He usually gets me to read scenes aloud and then we discuss them. Screwing is okay, but he doesn't like using a condom. He says it's like having to "wear a mac, like some dirty old man" and it makes me too nervous even though he promises to in time. Jerking him off is all right, but I get bored. What I like doing best with Nigel is talking about books.

4

I tell Pauline it doesn't matter, we can just concentrate on her. Sometimes I come rubbing myself against her leg. We both read *The Politics of Experience* and I switch from Number 6 to Gitanes.

* ...how life in all its anguish amounts to endless pacing round a wall with broken glass along its edge. Eugenio Montale, "Meriggiare pallido e assorto."

5

Victor says sex is like smoking a joint; it's no big deal, just something two people enjoy together whenever they feel like it. I can't think of a good reason not to fuck him, but I feel I need one. After all, he's handsome, dark hair and blue eyes the colour of his shirt. I'm not usually this choosy. Unlike the rest of us who are *close* to the Left, he's actually in the CP, been in it for years, a fact I've never referred to. He lends me a copy of Althusser, knows his Marx and Hegel and likes to quote from them.

The others are kids, not like us, he says. What about Anoushka, I ask casually, thinking of her pale hair and eyes as blue as his, the way she rides a motor-bike and how they hang around the campus together always wearing the same denim blue. No, she's not a kid either, he admits. But they don't own each other. Anoushka fucks who she pleases, same as him, even girls, he says, looking carefully at me.

6

The restaurant is one I'd never go to. Red linen napkins, candles. Panoramic views of Turin and Genoa on the walls. The Italian waiter calls us Madam and Sir. Mike orders scampi and I have coq au vin. He has melon to start and I have prawn cocktail. He's the only one I know who's got a job, a good job, at that, but then he's older. I'm disarmed when he says he's been feeling very stupid and a bit jealous of me. This is over our starters. During the main course, he tells me I have an interesting face and that he'd like us to be friends. I'm someone he could really talk to about art and ideas. He knows I read a lot, more than most people my age, he adds. The wine is making me feel relaxed. I decide he's a lot nicer than I thought he'd be. It isn't until the dessert arrives – banana split for him and peach melba for me – that I realise he's suggesting he joins in to watch me and Min having sex.

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Min finished with Di because Di was needy and got jealous of Mike. It's a relief being with me, she says, because I make her laugh. Nobody wants to be smothered, do they? She says she *has* to fake orgasms with Mike or he'd get too freaked out. He can be a real baby. That night it's his turn to stay over at the house and I hear them upstairs. Everyone in the house hears them. Or rather hears her. She's the loudest. The thing is, she sounds the same with him as she does with me. That whole build-up of high cries and then the staccato bit at the end, deeper, almost like a fox, six little barks in a row and then a long groan. Six short and a long. Trying to go to sleep. I run through the permutations. Either it's real with both of us or she fakes it with both of us. Or else it's only real with me... The next logical step is unbearable. It can't be

that. I'd know. ...una muraglia che ha in cima cocci aguzzi di bottiglia.

Trying to arouse myself to take my mind off them, but my body is clenched so tight I start to cry. Once I start I can't stop. I think about the mittens I've bought for her birthday, hidden in the back of the fitted wardrobe in my room. Is there any point giving them to her? Grey, soft wool. Like silver catkins on pussy willow. Telling her about Palm Sunday, every year taking branches of them to church to be blessed. Last Spring she brought me a big bunch of them to remind me of my childhood. Her stories about her grandmother making *pastitsio*, telling Min not to marry a Turk. A woman never entered her mind. Deciding I would bring Min home to meet my parents. I'd finally tell them. Promising each other we would do that. Staying up all night talking together, holding hands as we walked down to sit on the beach, not a soul around, except some man and his dog, daring him to disapprove, watching the sunrise, coming home and making love again. Six short and one long. ■

An Open Society

Boris Pintar

Translated from the Slovene by Rawley Grau

34

When my sister brought her boyfriend home, he was very well received. Our parents gave him a big dinner, drank schnapps with him, and told jokes. Father conversed with him in the boy's own language, since the boy was not Slovene. Father is familiar with foreign languages. He told the boy everything he knew about the place the boy came from, because Father also knows a lot about foreign places. Those he hasn't actually been to himself, he's learned about from books. Father reads a lot. After my sister and the boy said goodbye, in very good spirits, and shut the door behind them, Mother removed her slipper, the kind with a wooden heel, and hurled it at the door as hard as she could. To make sure the boy would never cross our threshold again.

Mother didn't know what she had against non-Slovenes, but Father, who is very well informed, knew whether or not they should become part of the family. Mother did everything she could to please Father so he wouldn't get upset. For her, Father was god; for himself, too, he was the god of the family, and not only of the family. My sister's boyfriend, the non-Slovene, never crossed the threshold again. Her next boyfriend was Slovene. There is still a dent on the inside of the hollow door from Mother's slipper, but it's covered by a calendar picture of a chimney sweep – for good luck!

My parents once invited a female friend of mine to dinner. She hitchhiked to our place but went farther than she should have; nevertheless, she arrived on time. She thought the incident was funny enough to serve as an icebreaker. My parents were very cordial. The girl was smart and attractive. Although it's not a good thing if women are too smart. That means they will certainly be terrible homemakers, have a mind of their own, and not take good enough care of the family. We said goodbye to her in a very friendly way, which included the obligatory invitation to come again. After she shut the door behind her, they spoke their mind. In our family we have never had a problem speaking our mind about a person, so long as that person was not in the room.

A woman who goes farther than she should, would

not make a good homemaker. No one could ever live up to my parents' standards. When I was a child, they praised me because I was a good student and wrote stories with short sentences. They predicted a successful career for me, ideally in one of the fields in which my father had hoped to make a career for himself. Out of a feeling of guilt, I did my best to make an impression on the people around me. I don't remember what I was supposed to feel guilty about. My sister didn't receive as much praise – she wasn't as good a student as I was – though women were not supposed to be overly educated. That's because they weren't supposed to make public careers (so as not to cause trouble for their husbands) and didn't join the party until they knew whether they were going to marry a communist or a Catholic. Politics and the Church were men's affairs, as we were constantly being told from the television and the pulpit.

When I told them I was a fag (which they already knew) they didn't say anything; Father, however, gave me a book to read: *In the Angel's Hand*, a biographical novel about Pasolini that described his tragic and, it is now thought, ritualistic death. Was this the sort of life I wanted for myself?

I no longer lived up to their standards. No longer could I realize anyone's career aspirations, nor would I be able to continue the successful family line, which had started with my father (that's because *his* father, too, had not lived up to his standards). For a family that sees itself as a saga, this is worse than being dead. My sister was praised when she gave birth to an heir. According to Mother, she and my sister are handmaidens – for their children, husband, and father. Today I dance as a bear in the circus. Our family has always had a nose for business.

Mother didn't know what she had against fags, but Father knew it wasn't natural and that anything that's not natural can become natural again, just as every disease has a plant that will cure it and every crime has its punishment. With Father's assent, Mother invited my friends to dinner so she could see for herself that I wasn't lonely. My parents welcomed this horde of young men, and Father asked if any of

them had a girlfriend; Mother, however, asked which was my boyfriend and then picked out the handsomest one and hugged him like a son-in-law. Father asked where they came from and told each of them something about their native region. He knew a lot about different places. We all said goodbye with broad smiles across faces flushed from schnapps, and with the obligatory invitation to come again.

After I shut the door behind them, Mother lit a candle to the Virgin Mary in the prayer-corner and sprinkled the room with holy water. That God's order might be established on earth and in heaven, that everyone might find his proper helpmate, that there might be peace in our family, and that God might be happy. After Mother started attending religious services again, she applied household versions of these rituals to the problems in her own personal world and tried to make peace between people through plotting and prayer; she did her best to see that everyone around her was going to heaven. There was a time when she did not go to church and there were no Marys or Jesuses in our house, because Father was a communist.

That's how things were back then, although she herself was always religious. Today she considers it a sin that I don't have any of the sacraments and she wants me to be baptized. I need the sacraments in order to go to heaven, which is where Mother will be watching over her loved ones and asking God to forgive us our transgressions. Sometimes she thinks she's the mother of God, and sometimes I think she'd like to have me crucified. I don't know if I really want to spend eternity with my parents.

Our family likes occasions. Birthdays and anniversaries bring order to life, provide a sense of solemnity and meaning. Civilization is orderliness, as opposed to the chaos of the wild. The day of one's birth is the beginning of life, a joyful thing for which we must be grateful. I wanted to celebrate my birthday with my boyfriend; my parents kept changing the time of our get-together, but my boyfriend always managed to rearrange his schedule. He left work early so as not to be late for the family dinner, which was in a restaurant in a different town. My parents were in good spirits. Mother told us how she went to church because then she could sin and God would forgive her everything. Father not only talked about places, but about times, too. The way times used to be. My boyfriend asked questions and listened. Father bragged about how important he used to be, which meant that he was still important. There once was a time when people understood each other between the lines. He liked having a listener who understood him. We all said goodbye feeling quite satisfied with how it had gone.

At home Mother lit candles and sprinkled holy water, that God might do what Father wanted and there would be peace in the house. Father was more practi-

cal and hired some male prostitutes to break up our relationship. His thinking was that if this union was a natural one, no one would be able to destroy it – not the gorgeous guy in the centerfold, nor the psychology student who studies the personality of the one he's trying to seduce. Father wanted to have another dinner just like my birthday dinner, only this time without the boyfriend, but I don't know how to ask the sort of questions that give the person answering them the opportunity to dazzle.

In our family, we all know each other very well. Father gets his information from the State Security Administration, which tells him who is thinking what about him. The rest of us have to guess about the things we don't have the information about. When Father is offended by someone (even though Father is the only one who knows about the offense, while the other person doesn't have a clue), he feels it is his sacred duty to take revenge, and this is what he uses State Security for. Whenever he wants to show me how misguided my worldview is, I meet some good-looking boy or even several boys. Time after time, I am flattered by the attention they pay me, as if it were a fact that the older one gets, the more attractive one becomes, and I always let myself believe it's all my own doing. What if it could really be true this time?

Love is intoxicating; it's like chocolate that doesn't make you fat – for it's only when we're getting over love that we binge and fast. We Slovenes cook up true love like the Swiss make chocolate. Seduction requires a fair number of seedlings so that at least one of them will be successful. And even before it roots itself, it starts putting out just the sort of buds one desires: *My whole life I've been waiting for my soul mate! I've finally found my other half, even though I'd stopped believing he existed! What amazing luck!* – and so on. Your views might differ in trivial matters, but basically your thinking is so much alike that you dare not agree always, lest he think you concur with him in everything.

But even before love fully blossoms and while the movie of your life is still in production, his ex appears on the scene and it turns out your other half has never gotten over him; or he suddenly discovers that he's really attracted to women, and men are just one big disappointment; or he turns his attention to some new flower and no longer has room for you in his life. In short, he dumps you. For a while he keeps you roasting on the spit like St. Lawrence, to show you the full riches of his love, until at last he flays you like St. Bartholomew, pulling the skin off your living body, and as you're hanging there naked at the blood-soaked wedding, he tells you he never loved you at all and that it's just an obsession on your part. This is what we call fucking with your emotions. And how many guys there are out there who make this sort of emotional fucking their regular practice!

When everything's as sweet as honey, the wasps start attacking. Your now-former love starts bringing up your past history – things he himself would not normally know about – and this tells you precisely who's been using him to get revenge on you, and for all the same old reasons. The petition of hate loses its edge when it starts amounting to the entire phone book. Father signs it in his own hand. Whenever someone tells me that what I call love is just me being obsessed, Father and Mother pay me a visit – they just happen to be in the neighborhood to play games of chance.

Climbing stairs takes the wind out of Father – he's put on a lot of weight in the past few years, ever since he got it in his head that nobody likes him. His hands shake because he worries about everything going smoothly. Father has to be the one who screws with other people's heads; if someone should ever try to screw with his, he'd go nuts. The pointed remarks begin before he even steps across the threshold; he doesn't want anyone to get a head start over him. Questions about your well-being and the weather are set aside. He never asks anyone how they are – he already knows the answer and it's your own fault anyway. His pointed remarks veer away from the general line of conversation so as not to be missed. They always conclude with the maxims he lives by: "You'll see soon enough ..." and "A pig only dreams of eating corn!" Mother agrees with everything he says, just like the repentant Mary Magdalene, who discovered love in faith. Then they hurry on their way, only to return same time, new love, when there are new games of chance. Privacy is protected under the law.

From time to time Father pretends to be ill; like King Lear, he wants to see which of his daughters loves him the most. Shakespearean tragedy comes naturally to him. He either has a sixth sense for when bad things are going to happen or he's an expert at reading between the lines. He predicted the war in Bosnia when the rest of us were sure nothing like that could ever happen in Yugoslavia; he predicted that the populist presidential candidate Ivan Kramberger would be murdered when we were all sure nothing like that could ever happen again in Slovenia; he checked to see how much money I had before I had the accident. Managing resources was something he learned as a child.

A friend of the family who remembered my stories from the school newspaper once asked me if I still wrote anything. I do write, but I don't get published, I said. But you come from such a distinguished family! Maybe that's why. I wrote fag stories, which were rejected by the editorial board. My friend told me the editors had received threats. Keep trying; you'll see, you'll get your stories published. I took my stories to a different editor and he published them. Some time later he passed away. But he'd given me the cour-

age to start a novel. People want to appear in novels, and many of my friends and acquaintances enjoyed discovering themselves in characters with whom they had the least in common but who possessed some quality or ability they themselves wanted to have. Some people encouraged me, but others were put off by what I wrote about. I once cut my hand washing dishes. Later, at one of our family occasions, I explained the stitches in my hand by saying what a terrible homemaker I was. Before I started my next novel I bought a dishwasher. I still have the scar from the first one. Scars are my memories. The fagmason lodge goes over books – even before they are written – to make sure there won't be a scandal. If threats don't work, they use mockery; if mockery doesn't work, they annihilate you. Just like on Judgment Day, when the bodies of the redeemed are separated from those of the damned.

Our mother was a wonderful woman – with these words her secondborn child opened the memorial dinner, which in our fast-paced age is something mourners do for their loved ones right after the burial instead of waiting the traditional seven days – because who can know where he'll be a week later or, for that matter, on the first anniversary of the death, which was when the early Christians commemorated their dead? The firstborn daughter was much too tired to attend. Women do their work before the death; men – after it. Women visit the dying, even sacrifice their free weekends to do so, but men see no point in this, since the dying are delirious, or may even pretend to be delirious, which means they can say everything they were never permitted to say their whole lives, or say things that were not proper to say – and for men this is reason enough not to have to hold the dying person's hand, which keeps making the same movements over and over again. Women feed the dying, pour drink into their mouths, measure out their medicine by the hour, change their diapers, wash them, rub them with ointment so they don't get bedsores, dress them, turn them in their beds, change their sheets, air out the room, and talk to them as if they're fully conscious and everything they say makes sense. Men impart their all-knowing wisdom about life and death over dinner with relatives, but never cross the threshold of the room in which their mother lies dying. They wait for death to come so they can demonstrate their excellent organisational skills, seeing to all the trappings and protocols of the funeral: the flowers, the wreaths, the curtains, the lights, the candles, the adornment of the corpse, the casket, the spirits, the ham, the cookies – everything funeral companies have to offer.

Women lose themselves in grief while men take care of the food and the drink and the polite conversation with those who express their condolences – their great number shows the esteem in which the deceased

and her survivors are held, the survivors who put such a brave face on their loss: *It had to be this way! What can you do? The end comes to all of us sooner or later! At least now she's not suffering. She's in a better place. To everything there is a season...* Thus the survivors try to cheer up the people who have come to cheer them up, and to create the atmosphere of a birth. The heavenly birth of our mother. We sold her brain to science; thus Mother continues to live on.

It was a sunny spring Sunday, as the meteorologists had predicted. The snowdrops our mother so loved had only just come into bloom. She had a beautiful funeral, which was attended by many. Sunglasses

hid the tears. At the open grave, the priest delivered a passionate eulogy: *You gave them life, and they took yours from you.* As the end was approaching, Mother had been unable to eat solid food. She liked creamy yogurt. We fed it to her with a little spoon. ■

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Berta Freistadt My Wall in Kilburn

*...you must not destroy its trees
wielding the axe against them
you may eat of them
but you must not cut them down
are the trees of the field human
to withdraw before you?*

There stands my little fig tree
one green fig, one tremulous
purple. There stands my apple tree
rosy fruit shy in the leaves.
Long leaders to be pruned
in august. Prune in winter
for growth, in summer for shape.
There lie my fragrant herbs
my leaning flowers.
This is my paradise
my Eden, my home
and all around, my boundary
in wood and brick and green
safely holds all. This winter
one panel to be replaced
two base boards, and the arris rail

*...only the trees you know
do not yield food
may be destroyed...*

Sometime soon, one day
a little pointing to be done.

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Brown Boy Transversations

M. Ana Bolica and Misster Scratch

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Ana: BODY

My body is a place of mines and detritus, a playground and a home. In the pre-MTV, small-town Germany of the 1980s, Eurasian tomboys were beyond the pale of the desirable. I was asexualised by the children's chant *Ching Chang Chung, Chinesen sind nicht dumm* (Chinese aren't dumb). My white peers called me dirty, slitty and ugly. There were few alternative repertoires that could have helped me return the gaze, or look at my body with love and compassion.

The only people attracted to my difference were old white men of the sex tourist variety. I dealt with the pathologisation of my racialised body by changing it in the ways I could, especially around thinness and femininity. Being quite fem, becoming a woman was a project I became reasonably successful at. But it did not come easily to me, and my attempts to pass as a "petite Eurasian girl" were complicated by my male desires, my distaste for many female roles, and my occasional attraction to girls.

The 1990s and my mid-decade relocation to "multicultural" London added further chapters to my bodystory. The more assertive presence and greater appreciation of bodies of colour has a flipside: we're constantly dissected into parts, shades and shapes, from "almond eyes" to "big bottoms" and "olive skin." I'm sure the British fluency in phenotyping would have astounded even Frantz Fanon, who, back in 1960s colonial France, felt "dissected under white eyes. The only real eyes."

The fine line between the desirable and the disgusting, which many racialised bodies are forced to walk, came home to me when I came out as female-to-male transgendered, and later genderqueer. As Ignacio Rivera, the Boricua FTM from New York, said: "Men used to want to fuck me. Now they want to fuck me up."

My ability to pass as male depends on my willingness to be treated as an underaged boy who deserves little respect and space. I've traded "exotic" and "whore" for "criminal" or "terrorist", and was arrested by community officers a few weeks after starting to

present for "shoplifting" in a shop I'd never been in. At my current work place, a university, many staff and students have a hard time recognising me as an academic. My access to humanity relies heavily on my middle-class and light-skinned privileges, and the relative level of mental health I am managing to salvage through this structural madness.

Most white transpeople have no idea what it's like to inhabit a racialised transbody. My political awareness of the medical experiments done on Jews and colonised people makes me unwilling to voluntarily submit myself to the knives of doctors and embrace hormones and surgery as the number one issue of the trans movement. I find inspiration in Sel Hwahng's work, the Korean-American trans academic. The Harry Benjamin Standards of Care were not written for transpeople of colour. How would I even begin to tell my bodystory to a white non-trans male doctor whose limited notions of trans maleness were tested on white genders and sexualities?

My journey has equipped me with valuable tools. A child from an interracial family, I know how to negotiate stares and mistreatment and feel entitled to loyalty from lovers, friends and family. I have encountered manifold gender and sexual expressions in the diverse queer and trans spaces I have travelled through in Western Europe and East Asia, and know that I have the right to settle and shift wherever it moves me on the continuum. I have spent many summers in Southeast Asia, where tomboys are lovely and men file their nails. As an anti-racist feminist and a queer person of colour, I had early lessons in solidarity with men like my father, who is shorter than my 5 foot 1, not much hairier, and was patronised as "a child" way into his 30s. This alienates me from white FTM aspirations to a masculinity which is as white as it is non-trans. It also frees me to express myself authentically – as a short, camp queer person of colour who knows that other people's readings and projections onto my body and my desires are ultimately their shit, not mine.

Scratch: IDENTITY

I identify as a transgender queer person or as gender free. This doesn't mean free from gender but more that I strive to go beyond stereotypes, to take on any gender attributes I want or disregard them, so if I want to be called 'he' or a 'boy' but still be 'fem' or be 'fem' as a boy but not a girl. I don't feel I can or want to be totally free or devoid of gender but would like to play with and break those norms. I want to be a gender freak! I may want to take T or have surgery but not fully transition into becoming male or to pass. Passing as a man of colour I have discovered is not the same as passing as a white man!

I want to be anything I want and who I am. The world finds this unacceptable and needs to pin me down. I understand its confusion with me and I celebrate that. None of us are the same and none of us are simple. I can be both genders or neither or more of one than the other. A contradiction even, a transition. Impermanent. I change every day, every season, every time I dress up (or undress), depending on who I'm with or where I am.

The notion of transitioning through passing with surgery and hormones to achieve status as a man, which tends to dominate the trans dialogue, is not something I have felt intimately on an emotional, physical or spiritual level. I value their discourse and ideals but they are not my own. Sometimes I feel I am not transgender enough for that world, when I am laughed at for wearing nail polish and told I won't be taken seriously if I do that or am told that boys don't pluck their eyebrows or that my facial hair isn't believable *enough*, then I realise how ridiculous that sounds and is.

My culture acknowledges and is accepting of hijras and hijranis, albeit in a limited and sexualised way. Less is known of the latter as they are not talked about in male-dominated history. They are both considered the 'third sex'. This is always something I have been interested in and related to. My cultural experience growing up has been to embrace femininity and dress up in the way a drag queen in the West would. Many Indian men *are* effeminate. Sometimes I feel *too* transgendered to be accepted by women and feminists who ask me if I will become the man I actually hate, my father: the abusive misogynist. I'm a feminist but being transgender seems to negate that. Not that I will change patriarchy and what it means to be male for the better, but that I'm giving into it.

Growing up in the West as a person of colour, and not in my native land, though having a strong connection to it, has made my life full of contradictions and made for a complex identity. I embrace that.

Scratch: FAMILY and CULTURE

I arrived in London aged 5 and it was a shock to my "ethnic senses". I'm from Kenya, where my parents were also born. My grandparents were from North In-

dia. When we arrived in London we were different and not something people were embracing. On the surface my family looked non-traditional and liberal, I guess they had to be. Notions of education and wealth were enforced. In style, appearance and interests, my father and mother exemplified a love of the West, and yet they loved what their culture had given them. It felt like a contradiction.

My father beat it into us that we had to speak the Queen's English and study, study, study! so that we could make it in this country, at the cost of losing our language/s. Now when I open my mouth to speak, people insist I *am* English. This angers me as it denies my history and identity and is contrary to the "Paki, go back to your own country" I used to hear when growing up. I witnessed my father struggle to socialise with English men, who only patronised and mocked him. A proud, well-educated man, he couldn't get the job he wanted, so he took his frustrations out on us.

My male role model was one of aggression, anger, frustration, and also of insecurity, instability and weakness. My female one – of weakness, resilience and forgiveness. My brother, tortured into being sensitive and a silent rebel, was who I wanted to be. So I played with the boys. To me I was a boy. Girls told me I couldn't play with them as girls don't play with boys. I liked girls and on special occasions my parents would want to dress me up in traditional Punjabi dress for girls.

We had no family in England and we'd become a vulnerable westernised nuclear unit which had to fit into this strange place's codes of being. My mother was a beautiful smart woman who'd been oppressed by my father, something my culture allowed. These were not my morals and so I started questioning everything, mostly with myself and those around me. I was frowned upon, perceived as a troublemaker. You just mustn't do things like that. Respect that this is how it is, with the contradiction that my mother wanted me to be happy so allowed me to be a tomboy. But what would happen when I grew up? I was growing up already! Whereas my white peers spoke openly with their families about their explorations, my family found this too defiant, self-involved, hedonistic and thus morally wrong, I hid behind 'GAY' as the nearest thing my family would understand and reluctantly accept. So I had to go out and find the family who'd understand and listen. I found my Trans Queer community eventually after years of depression and felt right at home.

In some ways I feel stripped of my culture. The way I look, as an andro boy, makes me invisible. No one from my birth culture believes me when I speak of my heritage. My queer family/community is predominately white and can't fully understand or relate to my experiences, that I do not want the same things or make the same choices with transitioning/being transgender. I stand out. I will never blend in, just as we stuck out in Africa, then in Britain. I don't fit into

the family I was born into nor the one I have adopted. My white peers ask why I would want to, but it's easy for them to ask when they've been more entitled to fitting in, it's a given. But I do not stand alone. I'm often drawn to trans people of colour who've grown up away from their homelands, especially if they've spent most of their lives in the West. Every day I make allies on the same quest to be respected, accepted, acknowledged, validated.

I hold onto the things my family and birth culture have given me. I am thankful for my sense of strength through unbelievable struggle; the ability to care and support others as family; the power to achieve; to embrace my difference, my beautiful (youthful) skin and colour, my affinity and talent with food, music, dance, art and politics.

Ana: COMMUNITY

I also often feel different in the trans contexts I have found so far. With the new interest in transpeople following the Gender Recognition Act 2004, this is a crucial moment in trans history, and there are real opportunities for change. Given this, the homogeneity of mainstream trans contexts is even more depressing. There is a resistance to sharing spaces and resources, and a conservative investment in respectability which leaves behind those most vulnerable to violent transphobia, such as migrant sex workers.

As someone who is multiply minoritised, I have had direct experience of many different struggles. I have participated in feminist, anti-racist, Black/migrant/Jewish women's, queer of colour, and trans spaces. I am just catching my first glimpses of the sex workers' rights movement, an exciting struggle which by necessity includes transgendered as well as migrant sex workers. The fight against stereotypes around "trafficked sex slaves," spread in order to naturalise repressive immigration regimes and the criminalisation of sexual minorities, has been particularly useful in making further sense of the racism I grew up with.

My confidence is growing that multi-issue movements, where people position themselves to their privileges and do serious allied work, are possible. At the same time, my trans coming out has made my need for safe spaces more urgent than ever. I simply cannot get through this on my own. But the issues with which I struggle often differ from those facing white transpeople, and I have found little solidarity in that scene beyond lip service.

Many white FTMs struggle with losing their queer and feminist communities, and face accusations of disloyalty and male privilege. The film *Boy I Am*, shown at the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in 2007, pits FTMs against lesbians. Yet there were differences between the white guys in the film, who wrestled with their new white-male privileges, and the

black guys, who reported feeling more vulnerable to violence as a result of transitioning.

My queer of colour feminist socialisation critiqued men and sexism, but also acknowledged the oppression that many men face. It was very different from the separatism in some white women's spaces, which claimed "women" as the blanket victims of "men" (see the writings of the Combahee River Collective and Audre Lorde). Police racism, again on the rise, is just one illustration that many men are not just perpetrators but also victims of oppression. The film *Injustice* documents the centrality of Black lesbians in the anti-racist campaigns in the 1990s around heterosexual male deaths in London police stations.

Racialised "communities" and anti-racist movements are often considered transphobic. Before coming out, I was involved in struggles to make non-trans Black and migrant dyke spaces trans-inclusive. Unfortunately, some migrants and women of colour saw transness as a white thing, and transpeople as, at best, remote coalition partners. Similar vibes were in the air at the Queer and Ethnicity Conference which I co-organised in Berlin in April 2002 (with Koray Yilmaz-Günay). I do feel a tremendous loss of those circles, but mine is more around anti-racist solidarity than around solidarity as a female-assigned person. If I identify as a man of colour, I will not feel conflicted about becoming "the enemy" in the way that many white FTMs would.

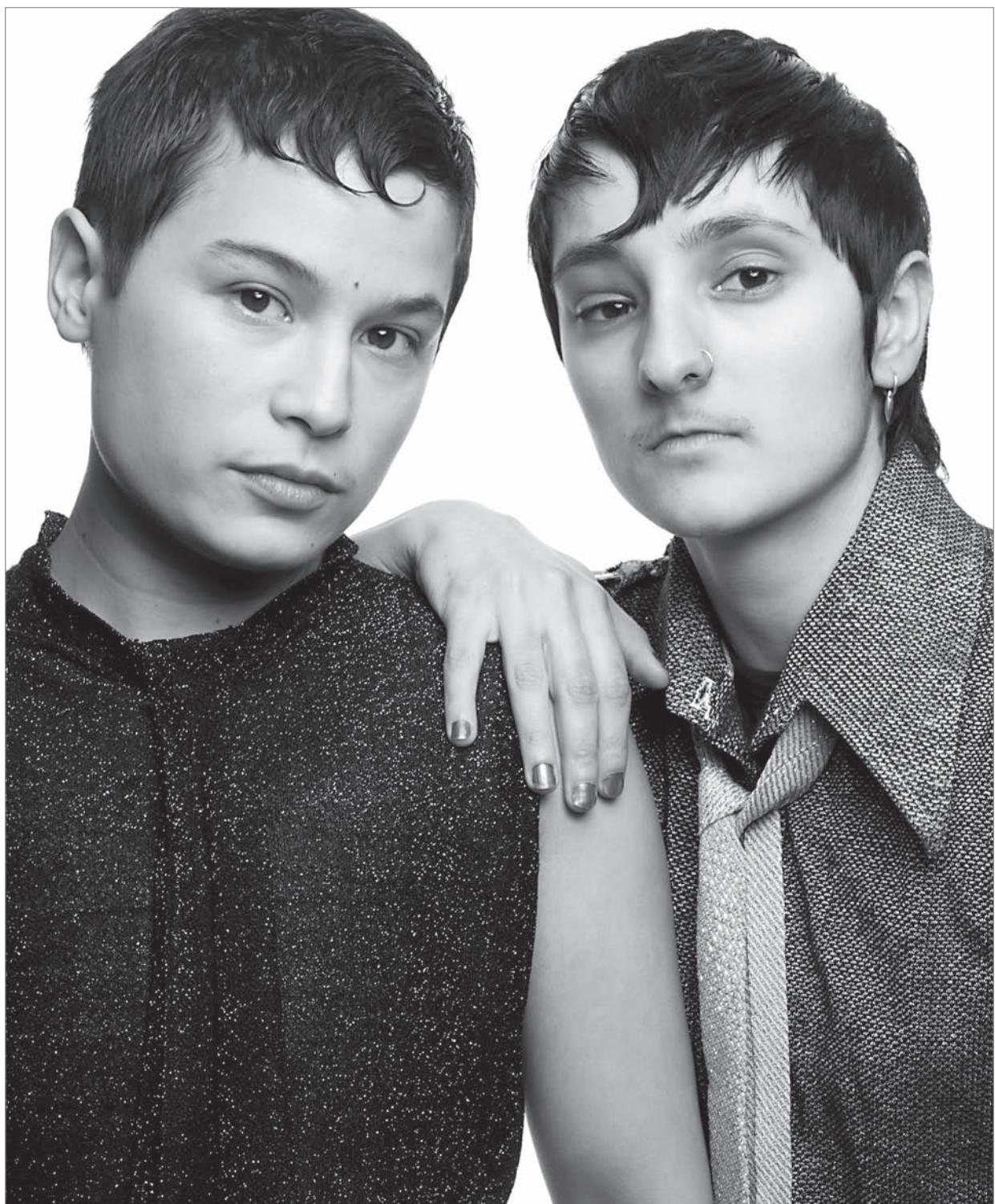
I am also aware of the trans-inclusive impulses in the early American civil rights movement. Sylvia Rivera, the Latina drag queen involved in the Stonewall riots, remembered the Black Panther leader Huey Newton in her interview with Leslie Feinberg: "Huey decided that we were part of the revolution – that we were revolutionary people."

Contemporary identity politics often lack such commitment to multi-issue struggles. There is a certain fascination with trans and other people of colour in white, including queer and trans, spaces, reflected for instance in the never-ending screenings of *Paris is Burning*, the white-produced film about 1980s Harlem drag balls. However, this fascination rarely translates into real solidarity or sharing of resources and spaces with these "exotic" populations.

My engagement with queer spaces is contradictory. I am physically safe there, can socialise for little money, use the toilet, and know that people have at least heard of transpeople. I also appreciate the wider left-wing, transformative outlook of queer activism. At the same time, the absence of a serious engagement with whiteness and even non-transness means I sometimes have a hard time recognising this activism as anything more than rhetorical and self-indulgent. This was brought home to me at Queerup Berlin 2002, where many white queers attacked and ridiculed our self-organised Queer and Ethnicity Space.

What I am missing most from these single-issue movements around gender and sexuality is a disidentification with what is really going on at the moment. Progressive white queers, gays, women and transpeople stood by apathetically while white gay leaders high-jacked "Muslim women" and "Muslim gays" in order to deliver the ideological gunfodder for the "war on terror" and their own entry into mainstream politics. Why

is it always queers of colour who have to put our necks on the line against racism and imperialism? When will our trendy allies put their money where their mouths are and become uncomfortable with their leaders? How much are they really willing to give to a gender and sexual liberation movement that deserve the labels emancipatory and transformative? ■



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Swallowing the Wind

Djurđa Knežević

Translated from the Croatian by Christine Backer

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A fly made its nervous way through the air, landing for a moment, wandering over the ceiling, the floor, anything it found in its path. Then it shot off again towards the light bulbs, one after another, until it was as if they'd never been on the itinerary of its zigzagging journey, because suddenly, quickly, it would come back to the picture frames on the walls, stopping as if it to rest or think about where to go next. It looped and slalomed, changed direction capriciously, abruptly, with sharp lightning-fast diversions. It buzzed, one second low and dull above and between people's heads, the next - flying lightly towards the ceiling or the windows. From time to time it stopped on someone's ear or walked across the bridge of their nose. Heads twitched discreetly, hands waved in front of faces and palms slapped necks, fingers scratched the places from where the clever fly had already taken off for someone else's nose. Then, switching back through the air a few times, spiralling into even tighter and lower circles, slowing down and relaxing as it flew, it landed on top of an empty chair.

The fly walked along the back once or twice, speeding up then halting, nervous, a centimetre or two in one direction then the same or more in another. Finally, it stopped, tense and vigilant, on all six of its wiry legs, and stayed like that for a couple of seconds, as if eavesdropping or checking the place and position were safe. When, after all those careful observations, it seemed that everything was fine and that it could stick quietly to its intended course, it began, with fast, short, energetic movements, to scrape its front legs against each other, stretching them, as if they extended far in front of it. Then it took care of its other parts, scraped its wings assiduously with its two back legs. Slightly nervous, yet still systematic and dedicated, it wound its silky, cloudily translucent wings underneath its hard-working legs and flicked them back, shinier and cloudier. Now and then the fly would stop and rest, as if making sure everything was still safe and quiet, that its surroundings were still unchanged, hazard-free, and then, checking everything was in the best possible order, it carried on its work with the same pedantry and dedication.

A hand lifted from someone's knee, fingers outstretched and firmly pressed together. Stiff and taut, palm like a shallow dish, it drew itself up slowly, barely noticeable, and moved towards the back of the chair with a hunter's vigilance, closing in on the diligent fly. Just as the ominous hand slowly and silently loomed above it and covered it with its shadow, the fly twitched. Then it stopped preening its wings and tensed, its abdomen slightly bent, ready to take off. The hand stood stiff in the air. Seconds passed like an eternity. The fly stepped to one side, moving out of the deep shadow. It stood and waited, then took several quick steps to the other side, back into the shadow. It stopped cautiously for another moment, tense, ready for a quick retreat. The hand hung arrested and immobile in the dead, motionless air. No sound, no movement, not even the quietest murmur. Another moment of immobility and tense wariness and then, quickly, as if nothing had even happened during those few long seconds, the fly resumed its task.

Crash! The chair swayed, wobbled, and nearly toppled over. Someone's papers left on the seat spilled and skidded across the waxed linoleum with its dull red finish.

Backs straightened in their chairs and heads turned in unison towards the chair, as if by some hidden command, while the four-headed table where the keynote speakers sat gave a stern eight-eyed glance, strengthened by two pairs of spectacles. A frown and a forced smile. The smile was official, programmatic. "We got it," it implied, but obviously that had not come easily. Lips drew back with quite some effort, and instead of a smile, formed an unattractive grimace that finally proved sour.

It's hardly befitting for a large and important women's conference to have its ceremonial and orderly flow disrupted by the imprudent tottering and death of an ordinary fly. And not just by a fly itself, which despite the general wisdom of its nature could still not have done it on purpose. It was even more unbecoming for the event to be disrupted by someone who was incomparably more intelligent but unfortunately much more interested in the movements and ultimate fate of such a meaningless creature than in the content and ultimate importance of this conference.

The bustle and mild consternation of the awakened hall lasted briefly, maybe not even for a whole minute, quickly subsided and finally subsided altogether. Shoulders relaxed again, backs sank a little lower in their chairs, and heads turned slowly and obediently back towards the panel's table. The cloud of unease dissipated in the stuffy room. The hall was calm again, as if it had fallen asleep. Maybe it had, but nobody would have noticed. Order had been established again, and that, it seemed, was all that mattered.

But the fly buzzed even louder in its death throes, flailing around on its back on the linoleum in a desperate attempt to fly off, but managing only to gyrate wildly across the floor or just above its surface. Then, madly and somewhat awkwardly, it knocked loudly into the legs of neighbouring chairs.

On the right-hand side, right next to the chair which had nearly tipped over, was a pair of the ugliest shoes imaginable, half-covered, thankfully, by the wide hems of tweed trousers in a dirty pinkish-grey. The shoes rested in parallel, with little space between them and their tips on the same plane. Worn-out but brightly polished brown leather, the sort of brown that chocolate goes in the fridge when left uneaten and having melted on a not too successful and happily forgotten excursion into the countryside. With their long tips, sharp and pointed, and cut deeply under the ankles and insteps, the shoes looked like slippers or those soft leather stockings worn by troubadours in Renaissance paintings.

She was already beginning to ask herself what it says about someone's taste when (let's say) they've gone into a shop and pointed to those very shoes. Then she looked at her own shoes. They, too, were lined up in parallel on the floor like in a wardrobe, but hers were black, also heavily polished and, unlike the shoes next to her, at least had blunt tips, almost square, and were cut high, well above the ankles. She liked these shoes, of course; in the shop her finger had pointed them out to the indifferent saleswoman. And just as important questions about fashion and changing tastes were beginning to form in her head, one brown shoe, the one closest to her black ones, lifted itself high in the air, twenty, thirty, forty centimetres high, and halted briefly, hanging dangerously in the air, and descended rapidly onto the dying fly.

She glanced unhurriedly from the deadly shoes, over the wide hems and the fabric of the trousers, over the knees where she temporarily lost track of the ironed creases. Slowly gliding upwards, past the edges of the jacket which sagged as if somehow intentionally suspended from the hips, up to the lap where the hands lay peacefully, the back of one hand in the palm of the other. The large, respectable hands held her gaze for a moment. Sticking out of the too-short sleeves were round, small wrist bones, then a tender, thin wrist, and finally wide palms and long thin fingers with prominent knuckles and restless fingertips.

As if by some vague internal order which did not entirely make sense, she kept looking at those hands and thought about an ear from twenty years ago. The ear was several rows of the wooden-benched lecture theatre in front of her, slightly slanted, lying under thick, honey-coloured hair pulled back into an untidy bun. A miniature lock of hair, which had come loose from the thick mass, was pushed firmly behind the ear to leave a clear amber spiral under the earlobe, instead of an earring. The softly sloping line of neck and bare shoulders glided down from the root of the ear all the way to the importunate obstacle, the bitter edge of the dress.

She had not wanted to wait for the end of what had anyway been a strange lecture. Somebody was telling the packed hall about the death of a renowned philosopher. The man had got up in the morning, had his breakfast, drunk his coffee, talked to his wife, read the paper, had another cup of coffee, and sat at his writing-desk. A few minutes later he fell over, collapsed in front of the desk, and died.

The audience was paying its utmost attention to the lecture in a silence of total piety, solemn and heavy-eyed. Some might even have been asleep. Only one inappropriate and quickly hushed giggle at the very back of the hall briefly broke the silence.

When she left the hall, the lecturer was enumerating the philosopher's works. The ear stayed somewhere in front of her. It had its own, inseparable face. However, she had no desire to see it. She was frightened of a possible empty gaze, a disharmoniously placed nose or mouth, an imperfect forehead or, even worse, an easily imaginable stupid smile.

It was a grey night in the town on the endless plain, which had started on a river and marshland and been filled up with flat expanses of sand and earth between raised barriers made of earth. A city where most of the districts had "hill" in their names, like some kind of nostalgic, impossible wish. The river and its many canals had been held back with stone banks and the marshes had become lakes with a dry scattering of loose sand, their waters ebbing and flowing to darken and carve the soft, ephemeral shores with moisture. In one good corner the lake's silver surface shone in the sun, but in the shadows, the water was cloudy and grey, opaque and silted with thick sand. Swimming in a lake full of sand or flailing about on a sandy beach felt almost the same. Sand, like water, got everywhere, into her hair, her shoes, under her clothes, into her ears. Months later it was still coming out of the compartments of her rucksack, scratching the smooth surface of the photographs in her purse.

A deaf hour when the sound of someone locking a bicycle, jangling the chain and banging the padlock against the curved metal stands in the street echoed to

the fifth floor as clearly and distinctively as if it were in water. An hour when you could hear a few footsteps along the street loudly and purely, even the quietest sound, a laugh and a farewell, a wish goodnight, an echo of steps weighed down and slowed by tiredness and loneliness mixed up with other light steps, hastened by yearning. A night of which little was left, running out and disappearing forever, where the only things still black were the deep shadows by the walls, and to which – not even with the best wishes for a good night and sweet dreams – you can never go back.

Last night, only a few hours ago, seems far away and unreal now. The vivid electric light at the start of the evening, when premonitions rule, defining actions, when words get stuck and fall wrong and mistaken onto the table, when sentences get broken and stay unfinished and fingers are restless and cruel to a crumpled innocent napkin.

Incommensurable with the pale grey light of several hours later, when hands and eyes are tired and empty, when the words and sentences have long ago fallen down and flown off into a corner room and soon-forgotten, started to crumble away and there are no new ones, a time when even burglars are tired of the night.

The room is cold, as usual in this northern city in December. In less than three hours, the useless alarm on her phone will go off and she'll be able to get up and furtively, as silently as she can, quickly and noiselessly and of course without a cup of black coffee, go.

They'd chatted a little over several glasses of wine. In the empty, almost bare room with its rough floor of unvarnished planks, only an unfolded futon in the centre, a small worn-out carpet in front of the stereo, the CD player and a heap of CDs in a corner, near the door. On the other side of the door in another, further corner, leaning against the wall, a big gleaming black double bass, dangerously large and arrogant, like a royal gardeners' foreman, twisty and discreet, but attentive. The walls have no decorations, no pictures. In the middle of the biggest wall, on an invisible nail, a long double-bass bow with two or three strings hanging off it, like a thin light ringlet. She could imagine tender fingers with restless tips running over the instrument's fat strings and another hand, thin and tender-boned, holding the unkempt bow and pulling it tenderly over the grumbling double bass.

An ironically pathetic Christmas oratorio, by a vengeful maestro, who'd had to come up with something and fulfil the commission at once, right now, this minute, so in anger and in trouble "stole" his own works, stuck together the best bits and gave them back to his thirsty patron and his doting audience as new, to the general satisfaction of the audience and his concealed derision. So the joyful oratorio looped

round for the fourth, fifth – who knew how many – time. It seemed as if its fate were to be derided. That night, some other old feelings too were calling out and trying to somehow stick themselves together and foist themselves off as new, as if they were there for the first time. They were full of deceit and accepted the deceit of others with gratitude for the acceptance of their own.

Curled up like a foetus, lying on her side and with her chin against her knees, her hands balled up under her face and her eyes wide open, on the very edge of the bed far from the sleeping, softly breathing body on its other side, she waited with her eyes wide open for the alarm to chime.

This is an extract from the novel *Swallowing the Wind*, originally published in Croatian as *Gutanje vjetra* by Beopolis (Belgrade, 2005)

The Writer

Maire Cooney

This writer, an old friend of Sarah's, was coming to stay. Her marriage had ended. It was the right thing, Sarah said, but it was not planned. She took a taxi into central London, this writer, checked into a hotel off The Strand and phoned Sarah from the hotel bar. They talked a long time. It was a complete shock. She needed time to think. The writer drank and Sarah listened. She would come home. Sarah would meet her at Waverley and bring her here. She was welcome to stay – Sarah nudged me, I nodded – as long as it took. We were happy to have her. Wasn't that what friends were for?

Sarah hadn't seen the writer for twelve years, since they shared a flat in Newham, but she and the writer had kept in touch. I wasn't too happy about her coming to stay, to be honest. I wasn't mad on the idea at all. I hadn't met the woman and that was fine with me.

The flat in Newham was something I knew a lot about, a dark, dismal place off Green Street. This was a few years before we met. Sarah talks about those days from time to time. She's nostalgic. It was an important time in Sarah's life. She refers to it as that, an important time, and I suppose that grates a little. There were six of them living there, all junior doctors, including the writer. Sarah once told me they might have slept together, that the writer had wanted to but didn't want to risk a good friendship. I never asked any more about it and Sarah never said. It was her first few years of working life and first time living outside hospital and student accommodations. It left an impression. You can understand that.

Within a year, though, the writer was out of training and concentrating on her writing. She did shift work for medical agencies to make ends meet while she worked on her writing. I remember thinking medical shifts might make ends meet fairly comfortably, but of course I never said it.

When we first started going out, Sarah showed me a pebble the writer had given her. It was just a pebble. It had a notch on one side, with two round eyes drawn above it and a wide inky smile below. She kept this thing on the window sill for the first few months after we moved in together. She had a champagne cork she

kept alongside it with Everything In Moderation 1995 written on it. I asked her about it one time. It was from a night out, one of those crazy nights. She looked miles away when she said that, one of those crazy nights, smiling and shaking her head.

The writer was the person who had convinced Sarah to stay in medicine. This was after her house jobs. Being a doctor wasn't what the writer wanted, as I said, and for a while it wasn't what Sarah wanted either. It was regimental, hierarchical and hard work. This was Sarah's first experience of working life, remember, before she understood that life is regimental, hierarchical and hard work. But back then she was struggling with it. The junior doctor's job was to make the senior doctors feel senior. They fetched, carried, wrote and followed at the rear. They took blood and collected X-rays. This was a while ago, remember. The joke is that now it's very different, junior doctors won't put up with that. In any case, things being the way they were, Sarah was ready to pack it in. The writer kept on at her to stick with medicine.

They had an agreement. Sarah would finish whatever training she was doing and the writer would keep sending short stories out. She would send stories to Sarah and Sarah would write back. You need trust to do that. The writer would tell Sarah about her latest rejection letter. She got a lot of them over the years. Later, she started writing for radio shows. She got a lifestyle column for some women's magazine. I think that's when she started making money. Probably when she started drinking, too, that was the impression I got. They spent a lot of time on the phone around then. She and the writer had been through a lot together. You can't argue they helped each other along.

We had invited the writer to our civil partnership three years ago. She sent apologies, a card and gift. The card showed two women in matching white dresses, armfuls of yellow flowers, big smiles. A huge rectangular box from Fortnum and Mason arrived the next day. Inside, between layers of tissue paper, were two fluffy white dressing gowns. It was hysterical, Sarah said. It was just the sort of thing she would send. She had a great sense of humour, this writer.

Maybe she did. I couldn't warm to her. No, more than that. I didn't like her. I didn't like one thing about her. We hadn't met, that was true, but Sarah talked about her, they were old friends, and over the years it adds up. I knew a lot about her. She wrote for radio and TV, for one thing. And she was an actor. Not an actress, an actor. That was important. She had been in *Holby City*, *The Fast Show*, *The Bill*. Sarah taped her on *The Bill*. It was her first speaking part. The writer was a barmaid with crimson nails and lips, blue eye make-up. She was being questioned by undercover cops. She had two lines. The first was "Poor bastard, but, like I said, I never saw nothing." She took a drag on a cigarette after "poor bastard" and stubbed it out after "like I said." Then she stared at the cop asking the questions as if daring him to criticise her acting. I don't remember the other line.

It's funny. Whenever Sarah mentioned the writer, that's what I saw. Crimson lips spitting those words out, crimson nails twisting a cigarette into an ashtray.

And now this same woman was coming to stay in our house.

Will I recognise her? I said to Sarah. She was sitting at the kitchen table, writing a shopping list. Does she still have those red nails and spangly top?

Sarah put the pen down. That was a costume, she said. She's not on TV these days. She does theatre. She writes.

Ah, yes, I said. Of course. So the drinking and chain-smoking, another prop?

She stood up, folded the sheet of paper, folded it again. You might like her, she said. You might surprise yourself.

I might, I said. Unless. She won't do a turn will she? Not knowing why I was saying it. God, she won't recite anything.

What's the matter with you? Sarah said. Her marriage has just ended. Her life has just fallen to bits.

I shrugged. She wasn't anything to me. I just shrugged.

Don't you get it? Sarah said. Don't you care at all?

And then she told me. All the details. All the things I hadn't known and wasn't too keen to know either. The writer had come home to find her husband sitting on the sofa with a young woman. Just sitting there. They were in love, he said, and they were going to live together. They would need a divorce and would be applying for custody of the three children, the twin boys and the little girl.

Oh, Jesus, I said. That is rough. And I meant it. I had forgotten about the children. Sarah hadn't much to say about them.

The young woman knew the children well, it seemed, though the writer had not known about this. She would often stay over when the writer was away. They had been on trips together. And the writer had no idea about this. Not a clue. The young woman was

very open to having the children, she told the writer, and not at all fazed at having a ready-made family.

Are you sure about all this? I said.

How do you mean sure, Sarah said. Sure about what?

It just seems, I hesitated here. Sarah has a temper on her and I wanted to pick my words with care. But something wasn't right. I didn't trust the writer one bit. I had to make Sarah understand. I said, it just seems – a bit theatrical. That's all. A bit unlikely. It's a story really, isn't it?

Are you kidding me? Sarah said. What the hell is wrong with you? She stood up, walked to the door. She put one hand on the door, then she turned and walked back towards me. She leaned her palms on the table and said why. Why do you have to do this?

Do what? I said. What am I doing?

She shook her head. What you always do. You can't believe anyone is as real as you are.

I had no idea what that was supposed to mean and opened my mouth to object but she was off, picking her keys off the stairs and saying she'd be half an hour.

I stood in the kitchen, listening to my heart thumping. I could feel it in my chest, my neck, in my head. I sat down. I thought, she's leaving me. I thought the word, dissolved. We used to laugh at the idea, our partnership being dissolved. I opened a bottle of Becks and went out to the garden. My garden, really. Sarah wasn't fussed. I crouched down by the tomato plants. Six, seven tomatoes on the first, three on the second, four on the third. Yellow-green now and doing just fine. I was pleased with them this year. I leaned close to them, to that smell that reminded me of being young. I checked the pots along the wall, coriander, basil, dill and sage, and sat up on the bench finishing my drink. I heard the car pull up and went back inside. I wasn't ready for this.

Sarah had the door open and her key jammed. She always did this. I watched her, fiddling with the key, chattering away – the key never, the lock always, so silly – laughing and pull-pushing the key.

Over her bent head I looked at the writer. Skinny. Black, bobbed hair with a straight heavy fringe, red lipstick and sunglasses with DVD sized lenses. She had a suitcase in each hand, heavy, by the look of her muscled bare arms. She put a case down and pulled her sunglasses up over her forehead. Sunglasses. Honest to God. It was April. It was Edinburgh, for Christ's sake.

She stretched out a skinny banglejangly arm. Well, she said. Well, hello. I've heard so much about you. The woman was supposed to be a writer remember, an artist. And then I realised. She didn't know my name. How could she not know my name?

I said, you have? Well. And then I saw Sarah, still holding the key, holding her breath, watching me. I looked at the writer, at Sarah and then I smiled. Well, I said. It's a pleasure, Laura.

And in we go. I sit them both in the living room, open a bottle of red and try to think, think. This is not the way I imagined it would be, not at all. It was the writer's fault. It was supposed to be all her fault. I pour the wine, take the glasses through and we sit, drinking, trying to find a topic. We try – travel, the congestion charge, the new tram system. Edinburgh, London. We compare and contrast. Then we move to the writer, her writing. And how is that going? I ask. What are you working on? Interested, polite. She doesn't know my name and, it turns out, doesn't know how I make a living. And this is enjoyable, somehow. I ask a lot about her writing, her projects. I know a lot. The writer seems surprised, embarrassed, frowning, glances at her fingers, at Sarah, turning her glass. I was supposed to dislike her. She was supposed to be overbearing. She was supposed to be untrustworthy, selfish, but really, she is not that bad. We get to why the writer is here. I say

It's lovely to meet, of course, but I was sorry to hear –

and leave the circumstances for her to elaborate on.
Which she does.

At length.

But I no longer care about the writer, a harmless, theatrical woman. I close my eyes and think about digging, of all things. I think about turning the earth, letting the air in, preparing it for planting. I realise this is my favourite part of gardening

and that the writer is talking. Saying
I found it a corrosive experience.

Corrosive? I say.

Oh, yes. Exactly that. I didn't sleep for three months, she says.

Sarah opens her mouth to add some detail. I don't listen. I don't listen to either of them. I wonder when Sarah stopped knowing anything about my life.

Philip said go to the doctor, the writer is saying. I had to laugh. I was a doctor, I said.

Well, of course you were, I say. Imagine that. How funny.

And then I wonder. Did she ever know anything about my life?

Anyway, the writer says. I did go. Nervous exhaustion. I had six months off work. I was glad of them. I came back stronger.

Excuse me, I say.

I go out to the kitchen and pour a glass of water. I drink it slowly, standing at the sink. I hold my fin-

gertips under cold water, then my hands, arms up to the elbow. I hold my hands over my face and run my fingers through my hair. It feels wonderful. I dry my arms and face and then I go through. ■

B Crush

Moa Magnusson

I'm a breaker without the guts. I want to spin on my head and fly on my palms but being upside down scares me. So I'm a crappy breaker but still a breaker. I top rock and pose and dress it sometimes, and admire all b's - except for those who obsessively have to touch their crotch while they're dancing.

I just had a major boy crush. Or boi, I don't really know. We met at a club the day before me and my crew were performing at a rainbow event in a town I'd never been to before. Ze was also a breaker; sweet and cocky with a cap, grungy curls and skate clothes. I was nervous about the performance and went outside to practise a routine on the curb. Ze was there too, and it seemed natural to talk. It rarely does. And it wasn't even a pick up, or a flirt, just a b meets another b.

The performance was all glamour. We wore white pants, gold sports jackets and lots of glitter make-up, mine spread over my moustache and as accentuated stubble along my jaw line. Afterwards ze came up to me, stroked my golden facial hair with a finger and I thought for a moment that ze was going to kiss me. It wasn't a tease, I just think ze wanted to touch it. We hung out, ate falafel with some friends, walked the parade and mocked the people chanting that they were "*the children of the rainbow.*" Hello hippies.

I think I misunderstood hir a little, or was a bit presumptuous, cause I thought it was a done deal, but when we met at a party the same night ze seemed more into a friend of mine, a blonde androgynous pop girl. Or maybe ze was just being friendly. The thing was, I kind of needed hir. The plan was to make out with someone, anyone, who could take my mind off my ex, who was still all over my system. So I danced hir into a corner and hir eyes were there, and hir lips, and body. I whispered in hir ear that I wanted to do all the clichés, all the butch-femme, boi on boi, straight boy confusion and gay girl extravaganza clichés, and ze lifted me up against the wall and kissed me, and we made out in an elevator and in hir car on the way to hir parents place. Ze was there for a visit and later that night we fucked in the room ze grew up in. It's a weird place to spend the first night with a person, but it was nice.

And then there were the details. Waiting in hir parents' hallway. Stroking hir bulimic cat who's name I can't remember. Waving a silent hello to hir mum who suddenly appeared as I sat there, her face signalling confusion and sleepy surrealism at seeing a stranger petting the cat on the hallway carpet at three in the morning. Brushing my teeth beside hir and taking hir hand as ze showed me the way to hir room. The pictures on hir walls that ze had made as a teenager. The depressing pretty music ze played, Cohen or Dylan. Hesitating at taking hir top off. "How do you relate to your body?" My tongue in hir saltiness, coming right before hir, then sleeping a hazy sleep in a bed built for one.

Ze texted me when I was on my way home. I was in a car with my crew, enjoying the road-trip feeling, music and crappy food, talking about sex and who ended up with whom the night before. They asked me about hir. I told them it'd been nice. No more, no less. Maybe it was the text I got one or two days later when I was at work, something about wanting to stand behind me and put hir hands up my sweater. Or hir eagerness. E-mailing all sorts of silly and not-so-silly questions: *What would your superpowers be if you were a superhero? When did you first start breaking? What actors do you think are hot?* The last one I could have done without, though, since ze answered hir own questions, but then - who doesn't want to make out with George Clooney or Maggie Gyllenhaal? Just a sting of discomfort at being neither. But what made me fall for hir was hir voice and low chuckles. Ze called me the first week and, in the beginning, our talks were sweet and simple.

"Hi." "Hi!" "What are you doing?" "Nothing much, walking home from practise. The air smells like spring, you know, the smell of asphalt." "Yeah, I love that smell. I just came home from the park, riding my skateboard. I scraped the skin off my left knee. Very nice." "Yeah, you would think that. Hope you have big plasters. Maybe with Donald Duck on or something, that would be very you." "Haha, yes. Don't have that though, just ordinary ones." "Well well." "Talk tomorrow?" "Yes." "I'd love to come and visit you soon. I

know a guy who drives a truck. I might be able to hitch a ride." "Is it safe?" "Yeah, a friend just went with him. He talks a lot, but other than that, he's cool." "Okay. You're welcome here any time." "Good, cause I'm definitely coming." "Cool." "Night." "Night."

If I *could* choose my superpowers, I would choose two things. One: To not be afraid of things unlikely to happen – like dying from a hand or head-stand. Two: To have some rationality when I fall in love. When I fall, I fall like a crazy person. Not in the psycho sense, I just fall in love and immediately the other person is super beautiful, perfect, and since most people at least take some time to adjust, it almost always makes me feel like a small black ant compared to the dazzling, enigmatic grasshopper I see in them.

Another aspect of me falling like a crazy person, is that I almost always fall for people who are sceptical, terrified, or just not interested in committed relationships. These are not sexy qualities in a person, but it's something I can more easily justify than my own feelings. I go for the most polyamorous of people and still I get surprised and hurt when it doesn't last. The truth is, I kind of want to own and be owned when I fall in love. It's not something I'd say out loud in the circles I hang out in, but it's the truth. It makes me feel very nineteenth century and disturbingly conservative, but, I guess, for me, that's the down side of being raised in the queer spirit of my community.

I tried to be responsible about it this time. I asked hir if ze thought we would be good for each other, seeing as we presumably wanted very different things. The next day ze sent me a "lets be friends instead" text. But I wanted the grasshopper feeling to stay, I wanted hir horny texts and crazy emails. I wanted hir. So I didn't cancel my train ticket. I apologised for taking things too seriously and too fast. "Let's just see," I replied.

My mum called me up the day I was leaving. "I'm going away for the weekend." I didn't tell her much more. She can never grasp the names or genders or pronouns of my friends and lovers, she always asks me what they *are*, and *why*. She insisted on calling my ex-boyfriend she, and felt the need to point out that she thought she could see that he was a girl. This gender vision of hers is obviously very versatile, cause when I first cut my hair short she asked me a number of times if I wanted to look like or be a boy. There doesn't seem to be any betweens or boths or transgressors on her radar. I tried for a long time to get her to read about queer and trans identities, but the questions kept coming like she'd never heard my answers, and nowadays it's kind of funny when she asks them. Funny in a way that makes our relationship very strained. I hung up and ran to catch the bus to the train station.

Ze was hanging with the upper part of hir body against the railing, facing away from me. I wanted to embrace hir, slip my arms around hir waist, lean my body softly against hir, feel hir thin rifled vest, low slung jeans against my crotch, nose in the curls in hir neck, turn hir cap around, kiss hir. Instead I put my hand lightly on hir shoulder, like a question. And ze turned around, stood with all hir soft warm brawny person facing me. We smiled at each other, said hi, hugged. Went to a kiosk to buy tickets for the subway. Stockholm platform and memories from earlier visits and other journeys filled me. I love train stations. The way they all look or feel the same, timeless, and like no one ever stands still in them. The feeling that you can always go somewhere else, be someone else. People were rushing by, bumping into each other, looking hazardous and busy. The cold subway air and hir facing me again. Chest, arms, feet touching mine. And suddenly I felt like crying, because I didn't know what I was allowed to feel. Hir hands at my waist, palms at the base of my back, the smell of hir shampoo, soap, something. I could feel hir feeling it through my body, trying to breathe calm but failing. All the heat from hir body.

And here comes the crescendo, the peak of the story. It was a summer-love make-out day and it was perfect. We went to hir place and ze made these incredible vegan sandwiches with lettuce, fresh and sun dried tomatoes, ajvar relish, mustard, sliced onion, houmous, cucumber and grated carrots. We walked through a wooded hillside with sun breaking through the leaves, the green so fresh, the first week of summer. We weren't really talking, just letting the trees be silent and magic. Ants and bumble bees made their way around us. This is the Swedish summer. It's so short and unreal you have to balance between worship and ignorance in order to make the most of it.

The water was shallow and we waded in. Little jellyfish splashed peacefully to and fro together with over-energetic kids. Big and proud ladies with flowery swimsuits walked around in pretty much the same mode as the jellyfish. Ze, tanned and soft and muscular, like a healthy farmer's kid, and me pale, a bit hesitant and suburban. After the first dip my suburbanness came off and I fell into the dolphin-like happiness that salty water in your hair brings out.

At the beach we lay on hir towel, kissing and touching and breathing into each other's skin and wanting to fuck and enjoying the feeling of not being able to. Back at hir place ze made dinner and afterwards, in hir bed with all hir boyishness and girlishness and otherness making me dizzy, and wanting to start all over again the second hir breathing stopped being crazy fast. Lying behind hir, hir body against mine, feeling hir fall asleep, filled me up with a tenderness and happiness so intense.

Romance was abruptly cut short. Ze woke up with

a stomach ache the next morning and spent the day in the bathroom and lying in bed and on the sofa. I stayed by hir side, trying to make hir drink water and Coke, entertaining us with personality tests from an old 70s book ze had bought at a flea market. We did the love tests between her throwing up. It was a mistake. Hir results told us ze was a “free-flying bird,” impossible to hold down and unwilling to love anything but freedom. Mine made me sound like I’d never heard of passion and was more into a marriage of convenience than taking risks. Maybe if ze hadn’t been sick, maybe if we’d spent the day kissing or breaking or anything except learning the caricatured truths of one another... But a throwing-up day is a throwing-up day is a throwing-up day, and real life hardly ever deals you those kinds of favours.

I left hir place still very much in love.

I think ze fell in love with me, too. But the personality tests lingered in the backs of our mind like alarm bells. Hir emails stopped coming, hir texts were more hasty than horny, and all the sweet and simple was gone from our phone calls. “Hi, it’s me.” “Hi. What’s up?” “I don’t know, we haven’t spoken for a couple of days.” “I know, I’ve had a lot going on at work and stuff.” “Okay. So do you still feel like coming here next week?” “Sure.” Silence. “Okay. Talk to you later then.” “Yes. Take care.” “You too.” “Bye.”

I kept thinking about the father and older son in the film *The Squid and the Whale*, the way they said “don’t be difficult” to everyone emotionally invested in them. Ze didn’t say that to my face but I was feeling it. It made me kind of sick. I freaked out one way and ze the other. You would think that life was less banal but it rarely is. I could feel hir slipping away and was thinking that I should break it off with hir while I still had some pride. Ze had a train ticket booked to visit me for a couple of days when we’d both be off work, so I thought I’d give it one last try.

Ze tasted of artificial melon gum, and we went straight from the station to my place. My body was soft for hir and my hard-on hard for hir. We made out against the kitchen sink, grazing and drowning in the juice of slow strokes and moans. All the different sides of hir, ze made me feel like a sixteen year old, clumsy and new with body parts I was getting to know. All the different sides of me. Between. And both.

For most of the time it felt relaxed and fun and hot, and it didn’t matter that I didn’t let hir get too close and that ze always felt a bit distant. The last night was a strange night to begin with. The albino kind in the middle of summer when the Nordic nights are so short that the light at 3am is clear and unreal, lighting up what should be dark. We had spent the evening with my friends at a pub quiz, and ended up winning condoms and *Midsomer Murders* on DVD. Ze was acting more distant than usual. Ze was leaving

in the morning and I wanted some clarity about what this almost-but-not-quite good thing between us was. “It feels weird, because it seems like you were more interested in me two months ago when you didn’t really know me.” Ze looked at me with silent eyes and I knew that what was coming wasn’t good. I felt like I had nothing to lose, so when ze didn’t say anything, I told hir more about how I felt, more about what I wanted and wasn’t quite getting. And then ze spoke and it was almost a relief. Relief mixed up with the cold feeling of disaster that comes with being left by someone you could maybe, possibly care for a lot.

“Fine, then I know,” I said. “Let’s just sleep.”

But of course I didn’t, I just lay there with anxiety crawling under my skin. Then I sat up. “You don’t get to sleep when I feel like shit. If this has mattered to you, you should at least try to make me feel okay. I want you to hold me until I fall asleep.”

“Okay.” Ze said it with a tinge of bad conscience, but that was okay, I wanted hir to feel bad.

Ze put one arm around me and with the other hand stroked my hair. I felt the defence melt away. Suddenly ze felt more tender towards me than ze had the whole week. “You are so beautiful. I don’t know why I haven’t told you that before. I’m sorry.” I thought of all the times I had told hir stuff like that and the silence that I’d accepted as a part of who ze was. I felt so naked, the way you can feel when everything is already lost and you’re alone in your skin once again and realise that you love yourself more than the other person ever could, and you find some comfort and strength in that. It was the best break-up fuck ever, but when I fell asleep afterwards, I dreamt of telling hir how much I hated hir for leaving.

The other day I was standing in the bookstore where I work, thinking of something I’d said the day ze and me and a friend of mine were practising freezes and hand-stands in a park. My friend had just been dumped by a girl she was dating and I tried to comfort her by saying how much more she would learn now that she could focus all her energy on dancing.

Anna entered the store. She’s this young girl who usually comes around the shop just before closing time. She has some kind of developmental disorder which among other things makes her nicer than most people. “Hey!” “Hey, Anna, what’s up?” “Are you closing now?” “Yep.” She rolled her eyes and laughed. “What’s funny about that?” I asked and smile at her. “You look so funny when you do it.” “Okay.” “I like you a lot. You, too, right?” “Yeah, I like you, too.” “Do you have a boyfriend?” “No, do you have a girlfriend?” “No,” she said and rolled her eyes again. “Your jeans are hanging really low. Why do you wear them like that?” “Cause I think I look good in them. And because I’m super cool.” Another rolling of her eyes and she strolled out the store.

At home I ended up dozing in front of the computer, watching vlogs on YouTube. There are video tutorials of pretty much everything, anything you would like to learn. I found this Australian kid who teaches the first steps of how to hand stand. Very pedagogically. He's standing on all fours, doing baby kicks with his legs, one at a time. Then the kicks get bigger, until finally he is standing on his hands, in the air, balancing. I found another video with a kid showing the L-kick, or Batido. Ze starts with a cart-wheel but stops before ze flips

over. Then ze does it from the other side. "I'll do it from both sides for you guys so you can all learn it, since I'm... special like that. Good luck. Have fun," ze says and finishes with a little bow, hands together. ■

Ginna Wilkerson Empathy with the Cutter

I know that you should not do what you do
drawing rivulets of blood from your own solid flesh;
I know it's an addiction, something to be stopped.

I could never find the depth of despair needed
to do it myself – or maybe I just don't have the guts;
having said that, I must also say "I get it."

I have the need to feel real pain, see it, like
real wounds that can be medicated and bandaged,
and if you take care of them, they will eventually heal.

Psychic trauma leaves no visible mark – no cut –
no blood – no strip of raised scar tissue as evidence,
yet the pain is more real than solid existence;

the blood is there, somewhere, coagulating darkly,
the hurt you touch with the expected pain of cutting
hides under my skin, too – and I get it – what you do.

I hope someone else cares enough – or is guilty enough –
or maybe just repulsed enough to lead you safely out;
but, in the meanwhile, when you take up a blade

and hold it cautiously in your hand
when your skin aches from beneath and only
blood will let it breathe – think of me.

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Luigi Filadoro
Untitled, 2007

Together

Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore

In one of my early club moments, I got on a black dance cube in the red, green, yellow, blue spotlights and heard “People are still having sex. Lust keeps on lurking... Nothing makes them stop. This AIDS thing’s not working.” This was high school, evenings I was having sex with men in public bathrooms but I didn’t call it that, it was a secret world. At the clubs I just wanted to smoke pot and drink cocktails and dance, I needed to get away from everything that’s what dancing was about. It wasn’t true that “All the denouncement had absolutely no effect,” but I could pretend when the floor was shaking with the bass, not my own emotions.

That was back when you knew the drug dealer was the one with the bleached white hair and the lunchbox with smiley-face stickers on it, you didn’t really have to hide your drugs yet, not even in DC like that first time I heard Crystal Waters’ “La da. La da. La da DEE... La da. La da. La da. DEE...” and I could just go crazy on the dance floor it was my space my place to go crazy I needed that. At the beach with my sister I played something by New Order from *Technique* and I was showing off all my dance moves, I mean I didn’t have special moves I would just go with it. My sister looked at me like I was crazy I said that’s how people dance at clubs. And then we went out on the balcony with the boombox echoing off the cement leading out to the ocean and we danced for the echo, for the cement, for the other balconies, probably not for the ocean as much because at that point we were just dancing.

Later, after I got away, there was Cajmere’s “Brighter Days” with that track clack bringing you right into the vocal hold “ooh uh I need ooh uh I need ooh uh I need ooh ooh uh uh I I need” and then back to clack track but always building. By this point it was all about something clanky, something banging, give me some horns but mostly just that pounding bass layering drums repeating sample layering bass pounding drums yes yes please more yes. Screaming when the beat got knock-you-down overwhelming and breathing-deep soothing at the same time or that sample came at the exact moment when you couldn’t possibly handle

it or just because you saw the wrong person at the right time or the right person at the wrong time or because there was something missing I mean there was nothing missing for just that moment with the sweat pouring down your face your eyes bringing the beat into your body your body taking it.

So then I’m starting conversations with everyone on the way home or at least saying hi and waving. They advertised minimal techno but yes it was that beat throwing me into stumbling grace, the way you watch people’s moves and build into and away from collapse and release like anything is possible and at the end when that guy came up and said thanks for dancing with me. A straight guy doing the raver jock thing oh that was so sweet I mean I wasn’t exactly dancing with him except that I’m aware of the bodies in the room and how we interact until I’m not aware of anything except this breath. Okay, so now we just have to hope that tomorrow everything doesn’t hurt too much, I mean that everything tomorrow isn’t just hurting, okay? Please, can we hope for that?

But the endorphins, like I’m asleep and awake at the same time because of all the sensation in and under my skin. Then it’s the next day, and this is the worst part: I’m sitting outside the movie theater because I can’t figure out how to sit inside without too much pain – I’ve tried moving around and even getting up to stretch, then taking off my shoes because my feet feel swollen, then even my socks because it feels too humid and stuffy in the theater. I hate this theater there’s not enough room for my body in the seat but also it’s just painful to sit anywhere, really. Then someone gets the person working there to tell me I can’t eat, so I go outside and stare at the ant infestation on the water fountain collection, literally hundreds or maybe thousands of ants crawling up I guess six metal fountains on the edge of what looks like a miniature sports field only too carefully manicured it’s art, or near art anyway, and in four of the water fountains there’s pigeon shit in carefully delivered rows. I’m glad the pigeons won’t get sick from the water they drink, but I’m not sure about everyone else.

I think of eating while sitting on the toilet because

the bathroom has a better cooling system than the theater anyway, but then the same employee who told me not to eat in the theater follows me into the bathroom – I'm guessing there's no rule prohibiting me from eating in the privacy of a bathroom stall, but I feel strange and conspicuous anyway so I go back outside. I'm sitting on the steps, but then there's so much burning around my neck and down my shoulders so I decide to stand up, but I don't want to eat standing up so then I sit down again and Chris comes out, he says oh you're eating – I was just checking to make sure you're okay.

Chris goes back inside, and then I start crying because I'm not okay, I'm really not okay I mean I hate that doing something so simple as dancing which is dreaming brings me here to all this pain. The way the beat bends forward and back, hands up into flip twist around the floor just another platform so so so-so so so so-so so so so-so legs on the floor legs in the floor, hands into hands so many hands into bodies another floor just another platform so so so-so so so so-so so so so-so just another platform light around bodies into eyes stretching eyes stretching light stretching so so so-so so so so-so so so so-so eyes stretching up and forward and back, head falling into lap onto floor legs into air into bodies another platform just so so so-so so so so-so-so-me-thing everything in the tumbling between shoulders and the air some-thing some-thing so so so-so so so so-so so so so-so something spe-cial...

so so so something spe clar...
Yes, that song where the light is purple, green, red winding out of the dark into all these bodies, me, on the floor, and I wake up thinking I should start a club called Something Special, no that's a little too ravey wait I can't even dance for more than seven minutes in my house without hurting myself, sometimes even the seven minutes hurts I mean it usually hurts something, can't decide whether it's better to do it anyway. I'm talking to Chris about how I get nervous when I decide to go out, like yesterday I walked back and forth across the street from this one scenester bar, but there were too many people smoking outside - I couldn't deal with walking through the crowd and what if someone wanted to talk to me, then I'd be standing still in the middle of all that smoke. But that's a logical reason to get nervous, sometimes I just get nervous about the idea of going out and then I have to shit three times. Or I'll get to the door of some club and I'll get that sinking stomach drama I mean I've always had that but there used to be more of a chance that once I got inside there'd be something to send me to the sky, I could walk into the music my eyes would close just for a second yes.

Tonight I'm thinking of going to this disco revival night, even though I hate disco, mostly because it's

taking place in the basement of 1015 Folsom and years ago I went to a club in that basement every Tuesday, not like the rest of the club all fancy just a basement not unfinished but finished in a kind of unfinished way, with a low ceiling like maybe you'd hit your head on the pipes if you jumped too high and everyone would dance like crazy, it was a Tuesday night so we were really dedicated and I'd always get that calm rush from dancing except I remember standing outside at 4am after they closed and all these people were getting into fancy cars and I was trying to get a ride, no one would give me a ride. The club was called Together.

Then, just a few months ago, this guy on the bus was asking me if I went out to clubs a lot, I used to, then it turned out that he remembered me from Together – he started going on and on about how it used to be all about the dancing you could be anybody and just dance it didn't matter whether you were straight or gay, who you knew or what you looked like, what kind of clothes you wore it was all about the dancing. And if I let my eyelids flutter a bit I can remember him too, he used to spin around and jump up and down he was a straight guy who wasn't afraid.

But then there's that certain kind of nostalgia so specific to club life, like you can take any horrible place and suddenly it was the place where everyone got along when the drugs were great when there were no drugs when the drugs were actually fun when everyone was different when everyone was the same before the straight people the yuppies the suburbanites the tweakers the tourists took it over when the music actually built it hit you over the head it was soothing it knocked you down it was all about the vibe when the DJs actually knew how to spin when two hours was a warm-up not a whole set when DJs would play for the music not for the crowd when DJs would actually play for the crowd when DJs would actually spin records when people would actually make out when everyone wasn't just interested in sex when there wasn't so much attitude when there were freaks when there was attitude when people were interesting when the music was actually good when it wasn't about who you knew when everything was cheap when everything wasn't tacky when you knew everyone when people actually dressed up when everyone wasn't so dressed up when you could have a conversation when the music wasn't so loud when clubs actually had good sound when people would stand in line when there wasn't a line around the block when they didn't frisk you when things were safer when everyone wasn't worried about safety when people would talk to one another when people had fun when everyone got along.

But anyway I'm thinking of going to this disco revival night, even though I hate disco I kind of like that it's in the basement of 1015, which I've just heard was originally the Sutro Baths, one of the big sex clubs in

the '70s, so I'd like to look for evidence, maybe those pipes. Plus, there probably won't be smoke, 1015's a big club with too much to lose they wouldn't risk smoking. A big club with only a few doors that seal like a fortress and this night is in the basement, there's no way for everyone's smoke from outside to get in. Even though I hate disco, I've heard these DJs can actually spin.

But I was talking about my nerves, so of course I'm not there yet. Chris wants to know why, it's strange because either I can't engage and I end up feeling claustrophobic, or I get too excited and then as soon as I'm out of the public eye I can't function I'm my head blasted. I wish there was another option -- Kid Koala's on now in my house and when Chris goes to the bathroom I try a few moves and when he comes back out he's looking at me with a mixture of excitement and sadness. I'm sad too because even a few spins and twirls the look in my eyes it's that space I miss the head side to side hands flinging I mean I'm feeling it and then just when I'm about to joke that I'll probably hurt something just from these few moves, I notice a pain in my side I don't want to say anything because it'll make me feel hopeless.

I was wrong about the music it was great. I was wrong about 1015 everybody was smoking I mean everybody it was like no one had ever passed a law I'm not in favor of the legal system except you know how much smoking destroys me I mean I wish other people could realize that, not about me just about other people but they can't. There's plenty of room outside to smoke, but no it was inside everybody was smoking with excitement like they were committing an incredibly transgressive act. Years ago I used to smoke and maybe I smoked that way too. I was wrong because I stayed I mean I knew people were smoking right away there was no way not to know but I couldn't turn around. I mean I didn't.

The place was beautiful they've remodeled it so that it's a circle with booths on the sides no pipes on the ceiling now there are little lights hanging down, hundreds of them almost like glow sticks in different colors somehow it looks elegant and everything shimmers white instead of black and almost the whole place is the dance floor in the center. I even loved the music when the beats got layered like house or dissonant like broken electro except it was disco don't get me wrong I know where house came from. People were festive no many of them were snotty but on the dance floor it was festive, sure people were working the 70s look but it was more styled and it's sad that the only way queeniness trumps masculinity is when it's high fashion damage, but I'll take damage over masculinity any day.

Maybe I could have left if I wasn't so surprised – I was surprised by the space it was gorgeous like a cabaret but bigger like a space-crazed landing pad. I was

surprised that I loved it, even with all the smoking I wanted to dance and once I started dancing I was there. On the dance floor everyone was sweat-drenched letting go I even knew some of the crazier ones. I liked that. I remembered how much I can love clubs all that concentrated energy like you're in a different world where you can watch people watching people watch me I love looking in their eyes and dancing slow and close and fast and far and faster and closer and smiling everywhere and I knew I was wrong.

Danny was working these beautiful queeny dance moves somewhere between voguing and disco diva and 90s clubkid she was in white, white in the white room so much sweat it was so fun to sweat and shake then John who said I haven't seen you in a while and we hugged in all that sweat. I kept thinking I should go before I get tired but really I didn't get tired I just kept dancing or maybe walking a little and trying to find the air but there wasn't much air except for one place in the circle with vents although it was fun to walk in a circle. Running into people and then dancing again, this one boy with scenester stubble who was maybe the hottest in the room for me I mean in the sexual way those big eyes he kept staring right at me and I stared back but I was wrong. I wasn't wrong for staring. I wasn't wrong because I didn't get closer to him, I mean maybe I should have gotten closer but I was feeling the place of everywhere at once with my body moving into calculated collapse use falling to find falling apart in that gorgeous way I mean I am falling apart but not now this is what it means to dance.

I was working this sweater Steven sent me from LA, this gorgeous sequined wool sweater, sequins in blue yellow purple magenta green teal diamond shapes and I hadn't found the right event for it because wool's usually too warm for me I mean too warm for a layer I don't take off. Tonight was the night for this sweater because it was cold out really cold for San Francisco I figured it would be cold at 1015 too. I almost turned a whole clashing outfit with a torn part of a prom dress around my neck but decided on the pale green corduroys and sparkly purple belt I made the right choice. Even though I was wrong, I made the right choice about my outfit. I felt like I was sparkling too, I mean I was sparkling, but I should've taken one look at that place and walked back outside into the fresh air, the drizzle everyone's complaining about oh the air felt so fresh but I couldn't turn around.



Eli Vandenberg
Finding
Manhood, 2004

Chroma: Biographies

Eric Karl Anderson is author of the novel *Enough* and has published fiction in the anthologies *Between Men 2*, *From Boys to Men*, and *50 Gay and Lesbian Books Everyone Must Read*. He lives in London and edits Chroma's book blog.

Brent Armendinger is the author of two chapbooks of poetry, *Archipelago* (Noemi Press) and *Undetectable* (forthcoming from New Michigan Press). He lives in California, and teaches creative writing at Pitzer College.

M. Ana Bolica writes: Trapped not in the wrong body, but in a time and place where queer increasingly means white and assimilating. Deciding to publish this has been the hardest decision. But as Audre reminds us, when we speak/we are afraid our words will not be heard/nor welcomed/but when we are silent/we are still afraid. So it is better to speak/remembering/we were never meant to survive.

k. bradford is a poet, performer and queer cultural worker who teaches poetry & literature at Columbia College Chicago where she is head of the LGBTQ Office of Culture & Community. She is co-founder of Austin's Kings N Things and Chicago's Gender Fusions.

Maire Cooney was born in Edinburgh and lives in London with her partner and two children. She has published short stories and has recently started an MA in creative writing at UEA.

Swithun Cooper's work has recently appeared in *Acumen*, *Mag-ma*, *Time Out*, and the anthology *City State: New London Poetry* (Penned in the Margins). He won an Eric Gregory Award in 2009. After several years in Yorkshire, he now lives in London.

Jonathan Dredge is a Scottish photographer with a professional background in industrial design and digital effects. See more at jonathandredge.com.

Nick Field is a performance poet, musician and photographer. He has a strong interest in exploring narrative in photography and the poetics of the photographic form. He studied photography at Camberwell College of Art.

Isabel Franc's debut novel, *Entre todas las mujeres*, was published by Tusquets in 1992. In 2005 she was the first woman writer to receive the el Premio Shangay for best novel of the year for her *No me llames cariño* (Don't Call Me Honey).

Berta Freistadt poetry and prose has been published in anthologies, magazines and journals in the UK, Israel and the USA. Her poetry pamphlet, *Flood Warning* was published by Five Leaves, and her book of speculative fiction, *Mass Dreams*, by Discovered Authors.

Luigi Filadoro's first solo exhibition was held at the historic City Hall, Naples in 1997. Since 2001 he has been working on portraits representing notable writers, artists and poets. His work has been displayed in numerous collections throughout Europe.

Christopher Gaskins lives in Brooklyn, where he teaches high school English. His poetry appears in such journals as *Down in the Dirt*, *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, *Poet's Paper* and in the anthologies *Sanctified*, *Ganymede and Gay City, vol. 2*.

Chad Goller-Sojourner is a Seattle-based solo performer. His work has been funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and featured on NPR. See more at sitting-in-circles.com.

Robert Hamberger has published five poetry pamphlets and three collections: *Warpaint Angel* (Blackwater Press), *The Smug Bridegroom* (Five Leaves), which was chosen for the small press Alternative Generation promotion, and *Torso* (Redbeck Press). He lives in Brighton.

Beatrice Hitchman lives in Bristol. She has written and directed shorts; her first film, *Cupboard Love*, was picked by MTV Logo for their Best in Short Film list. She has an MA in Creative Writing and is finishing her first novel.

Polish-born poet **Maria Jastrzębska**'s collections include *Syrena* (Redbeck Pres), *I'll Be Back Before You Know It* (Pighog Press) and *Everyday Angels* (Waterloo Press 2009). She co-edited *Whoosh! Queer Writing South anthology* (Pighog Press) with John McCullough.

Ziv Gil Kazenstein was born in Israel and now lives in London. He is studying painting and is currently enrolled on a Fashion and Print BA course at Central Saint Martin's.

Djurdja Knezevic is a writer and publicist. Her novels are *About My Mum, Russians, Firemen and Others* (2003) and *Swallowing the Wind* (2005). Her new book, *Soft Belly of a Unicorn*, will be published in May, 2010. She is a columnist for the news portal Zamirzine.

Nathan Kuzack completed his first attempt at a novel while still at school. His more recent novel explores sexuality and the HIV epidemic in unconventional, allegorical ways. "41 Frags" is his first published piece of fiction.

Moa Magnusson works in a bookstore outside Malmö, Sweden. Ze has been published in the Swedish magazines *Ord och Bild*, *Jakobstads Tidning* and *Göteborgs Fria Tidning*, and the anthology *Din Geografi - Erotiska Dikter och Noveller*.

Maitreyabandhu won the Manchester Cathedral International Religious Poetry Competition in 2007. In 2009 he won the Keats-Shelley Prize. He was awarded a place on the Jerwood/Arvon Mentoring Scheme (mentor: Mimi Khalvati). He lives and works at the London Buddhist Centre.

Char March is an award-winning poet, playwright and fiction writer. Her credits include: three poetry collections, six BBC Radio 4 plays, seven stage plays and numerous short stories. She grew up in Central Scotland and now lives with her glamorous wife Janina in the Yorkshire Pennines.

Sophie Mayer is a commissioning editor for *Chroma*. She is author of *Her Various Scalpels* (Shearsman) and *The Cinema of Sally Potter: A Politics of Love* (Wallflower). Recent work appears in *Hand + Star*, *ouroboros review*, *Sight & Sound* and *Stand*. See also sophiemayer.net.

Misster Scratch is a trans-gender-queer-fem-inist person of colour. An organiser of events like The London Transgender Film Festival 2008. Co-creator of the comic *The Incredibly Queer Adventours of SpYkeGrrl and MissTer ScraTch*.

Aileen Penner is a creative non-fiction writer and poet living in Vancouver. Always present to the erotic in heavy machinery, she is working on a suite of poems on this theme. She is finishing a memoir about her father's work as a civil engineer building dams, roads and tunnels in small-town Canada.

Boris Pintar is a writer, arts reviewer, translator, and editor. His novel, *Don't Kill Anyone, I Love You*, was published in English in 2001. He has two short fiction collections, and a book of essays on the contemporary Slovene theater. He translates plays from English for the Slovene stage.

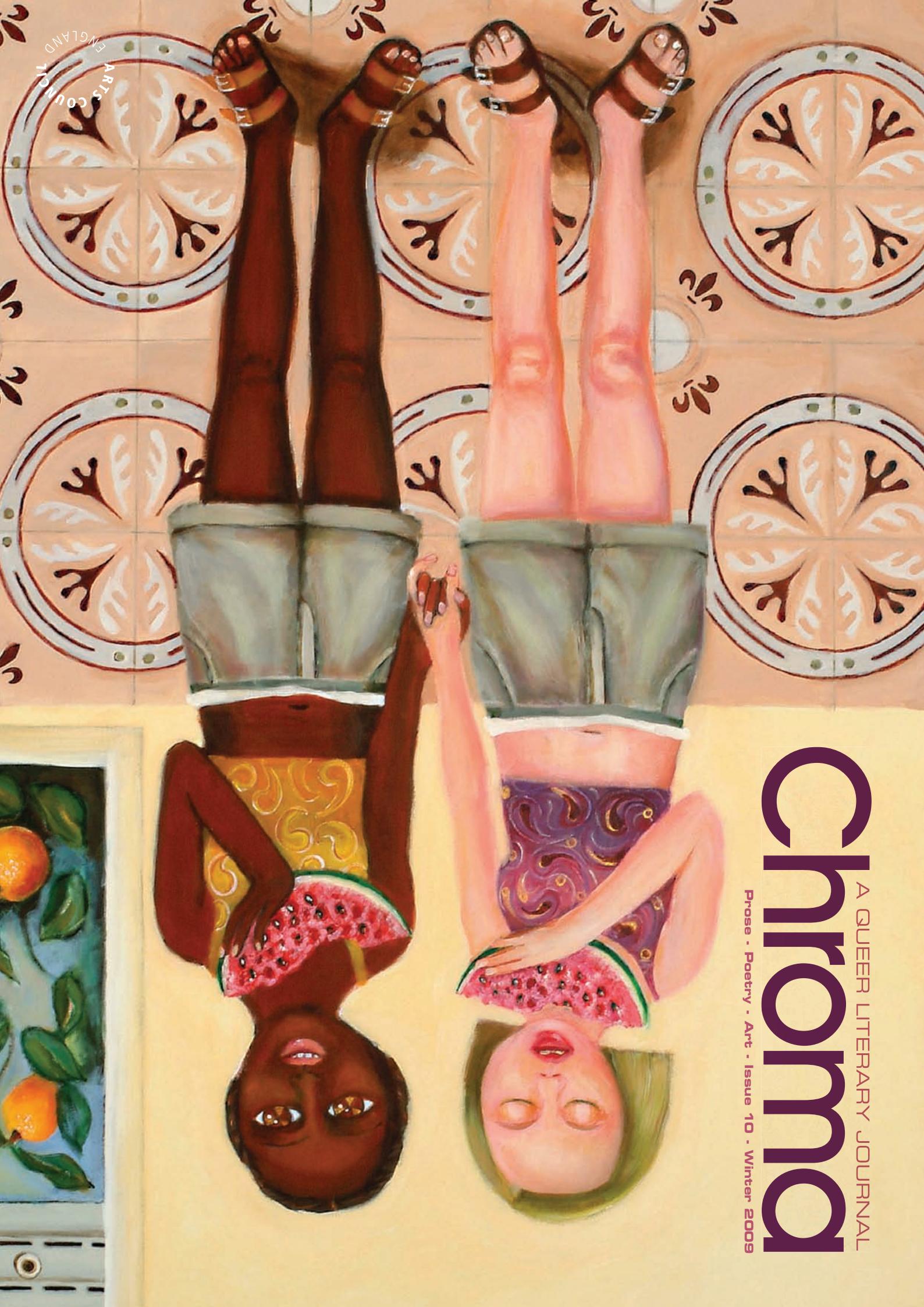
Irit Rabinowits is a graduate of The Be'er-Sheva College of Visual Arts. She worked as an art instructor for children and as a book illustrator, publishing two children's books with her illustrations (1992, 2003). She lives in Tel-Aviv.

Aneil Rallin grew up in Bombay and lives in Los Angeles. He does not drive.

Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore (mattildabernsteinsycamore.com) is the author of *So Many Ways to Sleep Badly*, and editor of, amongst other anthologies, *Why Are Faggots So Afraid of Faggots?*, a question you are all probably asking. "Together" is an excerpt from a new memoirish thing called *The End of San Francisco*.

Eli Vandenberg is an FTM artist living and working in Philadelphia, PA. His work has been shown nationally and internationally, and appears in *Self-Organizing Men: Conscious Masculinities in Time and Space* (Homofactus). See more at elivandenberg.com.

Ginna Wilkerson is a doctoral candidate at the University of South Florida, where she also teaches. Her poems have been published in *Gertrude*, *Fog City Review*, *The Machineries of Love*, *The Lucidity Poetry Journal* and *Currents*.



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